

ST. VEDA'S



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OR

THE PEARL OF ORR'S HAVEN

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'ALDESYDE,' 'CARLOWRIE,' 'GATES OF EDEN,'
'BRIAR AND PALM,' ETC. ETC.



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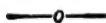


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ST. VEDA'S.



CHAPTER I.

THE CASTING UP OF THE PEARL.



H, Archibald, surely it is a terrible night! Listen to the wind and the roaring of the sea! It makes me shiver!’

Lady Grant shivered as she uttered these words, and, crouching closer to the blazing log fire, lifted her large soft eyes wistfully to her husband's face. He smiled reassuringly, and laid his kind hand caressingly on the golden head he loved so well.

‘I do not like St. Veda's in winter, Archibald, it has such a wild, cruel sea. Winter in St. Malo was like summer in comparison with this.’

‘It is not always cruel, Lilian; you have often admired the sunlight flashing on calm waters even under the shadow of St. Veda's. But you will grow accustomed to our storms, my dearest, and learn to love St. Veda's, as I do, in all its moods.’

‘It is very grand, I know, to see the great waves like mountains of foam washing our walls, Archibald; but sometimes, especially in the night when I cannot sleep, I think how fearful it would be if our house were undermined.’

Archibald Grant laughed a little at his wife's foolish fancy.

She was very young, and had been reared on the sunny shores of southern France. It was not wonderful, then, that she had found the wild, rude Scottish coast terrifying, especially in its wilder moods. She had lived under blue skies, among flowers and sunshine, all her young life, until love of the true-hearted master of St. Veda's had brought her to share his northern home. Archibald Grant of St. Veda's, Sir Archie as his people called him, was well worthy all confidence and love. He came of a noble race, and was frank, fearless, generous, warm-hearted almost to a fault. The Grants of St. Veda's had always spent with a royal hand. The house had its darker pages too; it had known times of trouble, but through all these its honour had remained untarnished. The Grants were nothing if not honourable and true.

There had always been a Sir Archie in St. Veda's. The fisher folk in Orr's Haven, the hamlet at the foot of the cliff, could not remember a time when there was no Sir Archie to share their joys and sorrows, to replace lost boats and tattered nets, to make good other ravages made by the winter storms, and to stretch out a hand, never empty, to the widow and the fatherless when there was sorrow on the sea.

St. Veda's was a weather-beaten castle, built on the frowning brow of a great rock, against which the waves beat restlessly and fretfully evermore. The quaint windows in tower and turret commanded a magnificent prospect, the whole sweep of the Forth, and beyond, the far-reaching and stormy North Sea. In summer sunshine the yellow sands and clustering townships on the Fifeshire coast were things of perpetual beauty. Lilian Grant would often stand at the tower windows in these golden days, fancying a resemblance between that fringe of low-lying coast and the familiar seaboard she had loved in her childhood.

She knew St. Veda's best in its wilder moods. Spring, summer, and early autumn were divided between London and

St. Malo ; at the latter place there dwelt a widowed and invalid mother, whose life had been robbed of its sunshine when Archibald Grant stole her child away. Had health permitted, Lady Grant's mother would have made her home with her son and daughter, for in Archibald Grant she had truly found a son.

Two children had blessed St. Veda's, a son and heir, already toddling about, and a baby girl a few months old.

'Let us go up to the tower, Lilian, and see the Storm King in his majesty,' said Sir Archie, breaking the silence at length. 'The wind has risen within the last hour. I doubt there will be damage done before the morning.'

'Are the Haven boats out, Archie?'

'Only a few. I hope and expect they will have run into shelter before now. We have too many fatherless bairns in the Haven already,' said Sir Archie, a grave look stealing over his face.

An expression of sweet pity came into the eyes of Lady Grant at these words.

'The sea is so cruel, I think, Archie. It must be terrible for these poor people to have those they love so constantly exposed to danger. Surely they grow accustomed to it, else how can they bear it?'

'There are some things, Lily, to which one never grows accustomed. Janet Erskine told me only yesterday that when the skipper is out she cannot sleep. Every gust of wind goes to her heart.'

'But Janet Erskine is not quite like the other women in the Haven, Archibald. She broods on things. You know how she has taken the loss of her little girl. I am often very anxious about her.'

'Yes, she is certainly a peculiar type of woman, but an excellent wife and mother, Lilian. Quite an example to the rest. Shall we go, then?'

Lady Grant rose, with a slight reluctance, and slipped her

hand through her husband's arm. Together they left the drawing-room, and began to ascend the stairs to the tower.

It was a narrow little chamber, quite round, with a storm-window commanding an uninterrupted view of the sea. Sir Archie set down the lamp he carried, turned its light to the wall, then the two stood in silence for a few moments contemplating the scene. It was wildly, magnificently grand.

For some days a heavy, impenetrable mist had hung low over land and sea, and the fog-horns had sounded night and day. In that weird, wet mist had been hid strange low winds, which sent a sad moaning along the wintry shore. But on the day of the storm the wind suddenly ceased, the fog was swept aside as if by an unseen hand, and for some hours an absolute stillness reigned. There was not a motion in the heavy air, but the sea heaved tumultuously, the wildfowl flew in screaming circles, and wise mariners made for some sheltering haven, knowing that soon the elements would be at war. At sunset, a wild sunset, which dyed the waters a blood-red hue, the wind rose with a sudden gusty shriek, the rain swept down in torrents, the white horses became battalions on the dark expanse.

Within an hour a terrific storm was raging on the sea. The noise of the breakers thundering against the Castle rock, mingling with the hurrying clamour of the wind and the pitiless dash of the rain, was almost deafening; the white spray cast by the angry billows beat ever against the storm-window in the tower. There were gleams of light on the raging waters, the steady radiance of St. Abb's, which never faltered; the far-away gleams of the May Island and the Bell Rock, and the occasional fitful shining of the moonlight when the clouds were momentarily swept aside. These but served to add to the gloom by revealing the fury of the storm. Lady Grant shivered once more as she clung more closely to her husband's arm.

'Oh, Archie, I hope none of our people are out! There is nothing but certain death on that fearful sea!'

'Many a gale as stiff have our boats weathered, my darling,' said Sir Archie cheerfully. 'But I fancy none will be abroad willingly. There will be no spare anchorage in Eyemouth harbour to-night. It is a grand sight, Lily.'

'Yes, but I like sunshine and quiet seas, Archibald,' said the young wife, turning away with a faint sigh. 'It weighs upon my heart to think what sorrow this one night may cause. Come, let us go and see if the children have been able to sleep through all this din.'

'In a moment, Lilian. See, there is a rocket. I fancied I heard the firing of a gun a little ago. There is a ship in distress somewhere near us—on the *Scaur*, I fancy. I must go down at once.'

'Out in that fearful storm, Archie?'

'Yes; why not? My wife, if there are human beings in distress, would you ask me to sit by the fireside while they perish? No Grant has ever shown himself a coward, Lilian. You would not wish me to be the first. "Sir Archie," they will tell you, "has always been the foremost in the rescue work."'

'I am a great coward, and selfish, I fear, as well. But you will not recklessly risk your life,' said the young wife, trying to look and speak more bravely.

'I have never been reckless, Lilian; because I have always found life sweet. It is sweeter now than ever,' he said, with fond emphasis. 'If I am late, you will go to bed and keep your heart quite at rest.'

'Oh, I could not sleep. I shall wait; perhaps I may be able to do something for the rescued.'

'Now, that is my own brave, dear girl,' said Sir Archie heartily. 'Come, then, you must arm me for the fray.'

She saw that he was eager to be gone. Like all his race he loved deeds of daring and danger; fear was a word without a meaning to Archibald Grant. She went with him to the gun-room, and with her own hands helped him to don his water-

proof overalls. He was tying his sea-cap over his ears, when a servant knocked at the door.

'It is a message from the Haven, Sir Archie,' she said. 'There is a wreck on the Scaur, and they are trying to land the crew with the rocket. They are waiting for you.'

'Tell them I am on my way,' was the loud and cheerful answer. 'What kind of a vessel is it?'

'The boy can't tell, Sir Archie.'

'All right; I'm going. Now, my darling, good-bye. Pray that our work may be successful; that is what you can do. God bless you.'

He caught her to his heart a moment, and with a smile was gone. She could not but smile as he left her, he was so eager to be at his post. And well might they love Sir Archie, he was aye with the distressed in their time of need.

Meanwhile, on the narrow shore, down at the Haven, a stirring scene was being enacted. The little hamlet lay to the eastward of St. Abb's, and was comparatively sheltered from the storm. The houses were grouped together in the slope in straggling confusion, as if each man had planted his homestead down to please his own whim. This irregularity gave a picturesque touch to the place, which was dear to the artist's heart. Many a 'bit' from Orr's Haven had been transferred to canvas. There was a little school and schoolhouse built on an exposed bit of grassy ground, about which every wind that blew played at will. The school served a double purpose, and was used for an occasional service on the Sabbath day. The little rude harbour was well sheltered, and commodious enough for the Haven boats. It was quite blocked this night, having given shelter to some unfamiliar craft. Surely every man, woman, and child in the Haven was gathered on the shingly beach. The women had taken shelter under an old boat, which, being partially raised, broke the force of the wind. They talked together in fearful whispers, and watched with intense interest the operations of those in charge of the rocket

apparatus. They had waited some time for Sir Archie, but the distress signals had been so heartrending that they had begun work without him. Just as he came down the road with his long swinging tread, the life-preserver was for the first time hauled from the wreck to the shore. A cry broke from the lips of the women when they saw that the first suffering survivor was a woman. In a moment they had gathered about her, where she lay drenched, cold, and colourless on the sand. Her figure was enveloped in a large cloak, and when it was thrown open, and they saw a baby at her breast, a thrill of pity ran through the whole crowd. The child thus exposed to the cold night air uttered a shrill cry, and opened its innocent eyes in wonder.

'Puir crater! Puir wee, drookit lammie!' said one pitying mother to another.

'Here are the blankets, Adam; we'll tak' her to our house.'

These words were uttered in such a decided voice, that instinctively the women fell back, and allowed Janet Erskine to have her way. She was a tall, striking-looking young woman, with strong, finely-marked features, and a deep, thoughtful blue eye. As she bent over the prostrate woman, her shawl fell back from her dark head, and revealed a look of exquisite tenderness which made her sometimes harsh face almost beautiful. She lifted the child from the mother's arms, and clasping it close to her own warm heart walked away, motioning the men to follow her. It seemed natural that she should be obeyed, for there was not a dissenting voice.

Before they reached the cottage Sir Archie met them.

'That's you, Janet. What have you got—a baby?' he said, trying to make his voice audible above the tumult of wind and wave. 'They've done good work already, then.'

Janet Erskine nodded, and went on.

'It's a muckle ship on the Scaur, Sir Archie,' said Adam Erskine next. 'But we canna tell hoo mony's abuir'd her.'

Sir Archie nodded, and strode on towards the crowd.

They carried the woman into Janet Erskine's house, and laid her on the bed in the 'ben room,' as she directed them, and then began to use all the means of restoration within their knowledge. Janet did not take any part in this work, except to tell them where to get the things they needed. She seemed absolutely engrossed with the child. She sat down at the fire, and, rapidly divesting it of its garments, wrapped it in some of her own baby's things. Then she fed it with milk and water, and the expression on her face while thus engaged was indescribable. It was a mingling of tenderness and compassion, and hungry, passionate pain.

'It seems needless to try onything else, Janet,' said one of the women. 'She's no' deid, for her heart's beatin'. We'll hae to get the doctor till her. Eh me, I wunner wull there be ony mair weemin or bairns i' the ship?'

Just then there was a stirring in the kitchen box-bed, and presently a small figure in a red night-gown slipped from it, and pattered with bare white feet across the floor.

'Oh, mother, mother,' he cried, in ecstasy, when he paused at her knee, 'Elsie 'tome back! Elsie 'tome back!'

There was a moment's silence in the kitchen. The women standing in the room doorway looked significantly from one to another, wondering how Janet Erskine would take this reference to the loss of the little baby, whose death had so nearly turned her brain. She had been 'queer,' as the Haven folk had it, ever since the child's death.

'Elsie 'tome back! Elsie 'tome back!—me 'tiss Elsie!' repeated Janet Erskine's little boy, and, getting down on his little bare knees, he laid his fair, flushed cheek beside the dark one on his mother's knee. It was a pretty sight.

A convulsive sob shook Janet Erskine's frame, and the first tears she had shed since her baby's death rolled down her cheeks like rain.



CHAPTER II.

IN THE MORNING.

THE storm spent itself before the dawn, but the sun rose above a quivering sea, and long rolling breakers tipped with foam continued to fret the base of the cliffs. The shore was strewn with drift wood, and out upon the Seaur the wreck of the ill-fated vessel could be observed, with her hull partially submerged. She had proved to be a merchantman from India bound for Leith. Out of her twenty-seven hands, nineteen were saved by the efforts of the coastguard and the fishers of Orr's Haven. The captain was among the lost, and none of the rescued could give any account of the solitary lady passenger, except that she was a friend of the captain's. The doctor came from Eyemouth to Orr's Haven during the night, but could do nothing for the poor young creature, who died shortly after his arrival at Andrew Erskine's house. In answer to his questioning, Janet Erskine admitted that once the woman had partially regained consciousness, and looking round had said, in a weak whisper, 'Take care of Annie.' Janet understood her to refer to her child. The doctor was naturally anxious to know whether any papers had been found on the woman, but to all his further inquiries Janet Erskine simply shook her head. She was a woman of

few words at all times, but on this occasion seemed even more reticent and self-contained than usual.

Doctor Purvis had a genuine respect for Janet Erskine, but he was not sure whether he liked her or not. Certainly she never exerted herself to be agreeable or pleasant.

'I fancy you will not let the poor little waif seek far for a home, Mrs. Erskine,' he said, as he was leaving the house.

A strange, swift smile dawned on Janet Erskine's resolute lips, and the doctor fancied he saw her arms tighten about the child.

'Ah, well, she will be safe with you, be she gentle or simple,' he said, with a kindly smile; 'and she will fill the place of the bairn I could not save for you in the spring.'

So saying he went his way.

Had the mother and child been in any house but Adam Erskine's, the women of the village would have been gathered in it discussing the living and the dead with that curious minuteness of detail they love; but Janet Erskine was no gossip, and it was seldom indeed that any neighbour woman sat down by her fireside. The few who had dropped in that morning had ere long slipped away again, feeling intuitively that they were not made welcome. So they stood about in groups at the doors discussing the stirring events of the previous night, but, as was natural, their chief interest centred in the drowned girl (she was little more) and the child who had escaped unscathed the perils of the sea. While they were thus occupied, the announcement that Lady Grant was in sight created a little stir among them. Sir Archie's wife had made herself greatly beloved in Orr's Haven, though they had been rather dubious at first about a lady from heathenish France, as they called it. She took a hearty and kind interest in all their affairs, and many a gift found its way from the Castle to the cottages under the cliff. They went forward to meet her, eager to tell the story of the night. She listened with interest, but walked on as she did so, and when she

reached Adam Erskine's cottage they fell back a little, though they would fain have entered with her. But Janet Erskine's cold, grave face kept them in a wholesome awe. Lady Grant knocked at the door, as was her invariable custom. She would not enter the poorest cottage in the Haven without showing that courtesy which she exacted for herself. Her very fastidiousness in such little things only endeared her the more to the people. Janet Erskine loved Sir Archie's wife with a love which was touched with reverence. There were other great ladies who came visiting sometimes in the Haven, and to whom Janet declined to open her door. Perhaps there was a difference.

Janet Erskine's little boy opened the door, his chubby, sweet face rosy and shining with his morning bath.

'What a big boy my little Adam has grown!' she said, bending to kiss the child, who, with a gesture of confidence and love, slipped his little hand in hers, and led her into the house. Janet Erskine rose at once to receive her, with a quiet native courtesy and grace quite her own. She set a chair for the visitor, and then bade little Adam put the bolt in the door.

'They come in on me, my lady—the neighbours, I mean—and I don't like it,' she said, half apologetically. 'I thought it queer when I came from the North; nobody seemed to call their fireside their own.'

She spoke with the correct and pretty Invernessian accent, which contrasted strongly in Lady Grant's ears with the broad speech of the women she had just left.

'Come back, Adam, and don't trouble Lady Grant,' Janet added, seeing the child still clinging to the lady's hand.

'How can you say "trouble," Janet, when you know how I love children, and that he is just the age of my Archie,' said the gentle lady of St. Veda's. 'And is this the little waif cast up by the storm? What a pretty little thing!'

She bent forward and touched the infant's dimpled cheek

with her soft forefinger. At that moment she was struck by the look of passionate and hungering love in Janet Erskine's eyes.

'And the poor mother is dead,' she said, without remarking on the look. 'Did she speak, or give any information about herself before she died?'

'She woke up, my lady, about half-past one this morning, just before the doctor came; and when I went to her with the baby, she said quite distinctly, "Take care of Annie."'

'Then the child's name must be Annie. Dear me, how touching! The sailors know nothing about her, Sir Archie tells me.'

'No, my lady, so Adam says.'

Janet Erskine spoke in a very low voice, and kept her eyes fixed on the baby's face.

'How very, very sad!' said Lady Grant. 'But perhaps there will be a clue found. If not, I think I must take her to St. Veda's, Janet.'

Janet Erskine's colour rose, and she put her hands over the child lying cooing on her lap.

'If you please, my lady, I shall keep the child, as her mother bade me.'

'You, Janet! But she would be a great charge for you. You have Adam, and may have half-a-dozen other babies,' said Lady Grant, with a smile.

'No, my lady. I know I shall have no more children, and I shall keep this one,' said Janet Erskine, with a firmness there was no mistaking. Her mind was made up.

'What does your husband say?'

'Oh, Adam will let me keep the bairn, my lady, because he said this morning I looked as I used to look when I had poor Elsie on my knee,' said Janet Erskine huskily and with a heavy bosom.

'I understand; forgive me, Janet,' said Lady Grant, quickly. 'I shall never seek to take the little one from

you. So her name is Annie? Will you call her Annie Erskine?’

‘I suppose so, my lady. I think her mother was Scotch from her tongue. Would you care, my lady, to go ben to the room. She is very peaceful and pretty to look at.’

Lady Grant nodded. Janet Erskine rose and laid the child in the cradle, little Elsie’s cradle, which Adam had brought down from the garret that morning. Until that day Janet Erskine had not looked upon it since wee Elsie had slept in it for the last time. Little Adam, delighted, ran to the cradle, and kneeling down with his bare, chubby knees on the floor, began to talk and laugh to the baby, who crowed back to him delightedly. Lady Grant saw Janet’s lips twitch as she looked at them, then she turned quickly away, and they entered together the chamber where the unknown stranger slept her last sleep. Janet Erskine drew up the white blind a little way, and then put back the fair linen sheet, the finest and best of her own providing, which had only been out of the fold for the first time the day that Elsie died. Janet Erskine had paid every honour to the stranger who had died within her gates. The face revealed to the pitying eyes of Lilian Grant was the face of a very young woman, and was not without its traces of care. It was a very sweet face, each feature, indeed, was perfect in its way, the mouth, especially, tender and touching. Her hair was very dark, and curled in short natural waves about her neck. Her small hands were folded placidly on her breast, and on the left there glittered a massive wedding ring.

Tears rose to the sympathetic eyes of Lilian Grant, and even Janet Erskine’s face wore a softened and beautiful expression.

‘There was a chain and a gold locket which I have not taken off,’ said Janet. ‘I noticed she often touched it last night, and her hand was on it when she died. I opened it this morning, my lady. There is the portrait of a gentleman

in it, and some words engraved on the other side which I could not make out. Would you like to see it, my lady ?'

'Oh no, don't disturb the dead, Janet,' said Lady Grant hastily. 'Only I think you should have taken it off before. It might help to prove the identity of the child.'

'Oh, my lady, if anybody is anxious about the child, they will not need the locket to convince them,' returned Janet Erskine quickly.

'Ah, I see you are determined to keep her, Janet,' said Lady Grant, with a faint smile. 'But you must allow me to do something for poor little Annie too. I shall send a parcel of clothing down from St. Veda's for her.'

'Please, my lady, I have all little Elsie's things. If you will not be angry, I will just give them to her,' said Janet Erskine, in a troubled, eager voice. She seemed jealous of the least attention paid to the little stranger by any except herself.

'Janet, I think I must warn you, my dear,' said Lady Grant, with great gravity. 'You must not build your heart on the child, because in all probability you will not be allowed to keep her. It is a very unlikely thing that a lady, such as the poor young creature undoubtedly is, will have no kindred on the face of the earth. Depend upon it, there will be speedy inquiries made about little Annie.'

'If her folk come, my lady, I'll give her up, but she's my own in the meantime,' replied Janet, and lifted the baby from the cradle with a swift gesture, which seemed to say she would never let her go. Lady Grant did not like the look nor the gesture. They foreboded trouble, she thought, for Janet Erskine's passionate heart.

It would be a terrible blow if the child were claimed by her mother's kinsfolk, and yet what else could be expected ?

Lady Grant shook her head with a pitiful little smile as she bade Janet Erskine good-bye. She was not sorry to meet

Adam Erskine, the skipper, as he was familiarly called, a little way from his own door.

Janet Erskine's husband was a fine, stalwart, handsome man, with a face which inspired ready confidence and love.

He was 'looked up to' in Orr's Haven because he was a man who never diverged a hair's-breadth from the way of uprightness and truth. He took off his hat to Sir Archie's wife, and kept it in his hand while he spoke to her.

'Can you walk a little way with me, Captain Erskine? I have been quite a long time beside Janet, and I am a little troubled about her.'

'So am I, my leddy, so am I,' said the skipper, in a low voice, as he put on his hat and turned to walk by the lady's side.

'I could almost wish, Adam, the poor lady and her child had been taken into any house but yours. Janet has set her heart fearfully on the child already.'

'Ay, my leddy, it may be the Lord's dacin'. Janet was needin' the bairn. She's never gotten ower wee Elsie,' said the skipper, and for a moment turned his eyes away to the heaving sea. Perhaps there was a dimness there which made him a little ashamed.

'I know she has been brooding all the summer, Adam. But it is the most likely thing in the world that relatives will turn up to claim the child. I have tried to warn Janet, and to prepare her. Have you not?'

'No, my leddy; I've left it wi' the Lord. He can manage weemin folk like my Janet better nor me. D'ye no mind He had a' kinds to deal wi' when He was on earth, an' He aye took the richt way? If He tak's the bairn awa', He'll gie the wife strength to bear it.'

It was a simple and comforting faith, which touched Lilian Grant inexpressibly as it fell from the lips of the rough, strong, seafaring man. Ay, Adam Erskine was a giant in physical strength, but he had the heart of a little child.

'It is not easy to understand the Lord's dealings with us sometimes,' said Lady Grant musingly. 'Why should He not have allowed you and Janet to keep your little girl? I know of none better fitted to bring up children.'

'Mebbe He. thocht otherwise. I'll no' say but what I've haen mony a sair heart ower my lamb, nor that I hinna been fell anxious whiles aboot Janet. She's no' like ither women folk, as ye've maybe seen, my leddy. She never shed a tear ower Elsie; but, oh, it took a grup o' her, my leddy. Mony an' mony a nicht she never steekit een efter'd.'

'I know she has deep feelings; but she is a good, dear woman for all that.'

'Ay is she,' said Adam quietly, but with emphasis which told that the words came from the heart.

'Well, then, we must just hope that little Annie will find a permanent home in the Haven,' said Lady Grant cheerfully. 'Isn't it quite like a romance?'

While these two were discussing Janet Erskine, she was peculiarly engaged in the inner room of the cottage where the dead woman lay.

From the locked recess of her chest of drawers she took a little sandal-wood box, which was fitted with a silver lock and key. She set it on the toilet table in the window, slipped the bolt in the room door, and opened the lid. Then from out the box she took a number of folded papers, a few trinkets of Indian workmanship, and some old letters tied with a blue ribbon. She fingered the papers a moment. The impulse was strong upon her to learn what they contained, but she restrained her curiosity and laid them untouched on the table. Then with a hand which did not tremble she put back the sheet once more from the sweet face on the pillow, and, unfastening the night-dress, removed the locket and chain from the dead girl's neck. Then she placed it in the bottom of the box among the other trinkets, laid the letters and papers above them, and shut down the lid. She put the box then in her

pocket, and returned to the kitchen, where little Adam was watching the baby while she slept. A rare smile swept across Janet's face. Just so the boy had been wont to watch by little Elsie's cradle in the sweet bygone days. She passed through the kitchen, and mounted the narrow step ladder to the garret. It was a very low-ceiled place—Janet's tall figure quite reached the roof. It was used as a lumber place for old nets and fishing tackle, and smelt wholesomely of tar and sea-weed.

On the rafters, in the farthest and darkest corner, there was a curious little recess, known only to Janet herself. It was filled with cobwebs, but she did not sweep them away. Among cobwebs and dust the sandal-wood case would keep its secret safe for many a long day—the secret which even Janet Erskine did not know. In this matter she was honest according to her light. Perhaps the complete and willing ignorance of her adopted child's identity lessened the magnitude of the injustice thus blindly done to the little orphan cast up by the wreck.





CHAPTER III.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER.



ON a fine summer afternoon a young and winsome girl came leisurely down the slope from St. Veda's to Orr's Haven. She wore a dainty muslin dress and a broad white sun hat, and in her ungloved hands she carried a basket of flowers. She had a blush rose in her belt, and one at her throat, and their tints were not more delicately lovely than that on her fair cheek. She was very lovely, but it was a fragile loveliness; the delicate health of the only daughter of the house of Grant oftentimes cast a sore shadow on St. Veda's. As is so often seen, that frail casket held a tender, unselfish heart, and a pure and lovely mind.

A noble mastiff, with a head like a lion, but with eyes filled with a human gentleness, walked with slow and stately step by his young mistress's side. In summer weather, when Ethel Grant almost lived out of doors, the dog was her constant companion—nay, more, he was her protector and her friend. During the dark winter months, when she was confined almost continuously to her rooms in the Castle, he was constantly by her side. His devotion to her was as beautiful as it was striking. Ethel Grant was the counterpart of her mother, and was loved as she had been and was in Orr's Haven. There was not a man in the Haven who would



not willingly lay down his life for Sir Archie's wife and Sir Archie's daughter. They had been angels of love and mercy to many a shadowed home among their people, and they had their reward. But Miss Ethel belonged to them in a peculiar way. Had she not been born on their own rocky heights? Had she not been one of them since the days when she first came toddling down to the Haven, clinging to her nurse's hand, a sweet baby-angel who seemed to belong to another sphere?

St. Veda's was very dear to Ethel Grant; it was the place she loved best on earth. And when health demanded a warmer, more genial clime, she counted the days which must pass till she could again return to St. Veda's.

There was a sweet smile on her face that summer afternoon as she came within sight of the hamlet, from which she had been absent so long. For seven long months she had been with her grandmother at St. Malo, until July sunshine took the edge off the wild east winds which swept up the Firth. These east winds were more fatal than icy blasts to Ethel Grant.

'We must stand here, Major, just for a few minutes,' she said, when she reached the low sea-wall which separated the road from the beach, 'just to admire our own lovely Haven. Paws up, eyes straight ahead. Now, my Major, did you ever even see anything half so beautiful as that? Can St. Malo or San Remo touch it, Major? No, no, my doggie, for this is *home*.'

Major wagged his heavy tail, and complacently rubbed his massive head against his mistress's arm. If he could have spoken, he would have agreed with her, of course.

She set down her basket, and, taking a seat for a moment on the low wall, looked out to sea with delighted eyes. Yet there was not very much to be seen, after all; a little straggling hamlet scattered above the shingly beach, a tiny bay shut in by frowning rocks, a primitive harbour, where

one or two fishing boats lazily drifted at anchor, and beyond a great expanse of glittering, sunny sea. To the eastward the grey towers of St. Veda's stood like sentinels to guard the hamlet from all harm, and to westward the grand promontory of St. Abb's, with the lighthouse gleaming whitely in the sun. It had its own beauty, and those who loved it had never found its peer at home or abroad.

'Oh yes, it is lovely, Major,' said the young lady, as her hand fell with caressing touch on the dog's noble head. 'This is as you and I love to see it. We don't like dark days and howling winds; they shut us up so, and are very cruel to us. We like these tiny little waves singing in the sun, for there's sorrow in our hearts, my doggie, when there's sorrow on the sea. But come, we must go and see Annie Erskine. Ah, Major, if you bark so loudly with joy I shall be the least bit jealous of Annie Erskine, shall I?'

Thus talking caressingly to her four-footed companion, Ethel Grant went on to the village, stopping often on the way, perhaps to pat some bare-headed urchin, or to ask a kindly question at the women mending the nets at their doors. They knew that she was going to the skipper's cottage, where it had always been her wont to rest a while. If they were a little jealous of the Erskines, they were not surprised at Miss Ethel. Janet Erskine had always held herself a little above them. They had never felt very kindly towards her from the first, and had been humbled to think that Adam Erskine had not thought any Haven or Eyemouth lass good enough for him, but had to go away to the North to seek a proud and genty speaking wife. So they had had a prejudice against Janet from the first, and very little effort had she made to overcome it.

The skipper's cottage door was open when Ethel reached it. Before she could knock, Major had bounded unceremoniously into the house, and in a moment Janet Erskine was at the door, with a smile of honest welcome on her face.

'Oh, Miss Ethel, my dear, come away.'

She took both the young lady's hands in hers, and looked with the keen solicitude of love into her sweet face.

'You are better? Come in, come in,' she said, and, hurrying into the kitchen, drew in the skipper's chair, and put her own cushion on it.

'Oh yes, I am ever so much better, thanks to dear grandmother; but oh, it is so pleasant to be at home. And are you quite well, Mrs. Erskine? and how is the skipper and Adam and Annie?'

'All well, thank you, Miss Ethel; all well,' said Janet Erskine, sitting down to her seam again in her usual quiet manner. Twenty years had wrought comparatively little change in Janet Erskine. A few grey hairs, a line or two on the broad brow, a little hardening of the features, perhaps, indicated that time had been at work. But she had kept her youth well. To look at her one would not think she was in her fiftieth year. Her figure was still tall and straight; her movements active, vigorous, nervous, as of yore, but she had had no trouble to break her down. Her husband and son had been spared through many perils, and their worldly affairs had prospered. She was apparently without a care. Ethel Grant had a sincere respect for Janet Erskine, but she did not quite understand her, and at times showed her mother's vague distrust of her. She was not open or frank, she never expressed an opinion unless in direct answer to a question, and even then her words were few and guarded. Janet Erskine would certainly never get herself into trouble with her tongue.

'Are you all well at St. Veda's, Miss Ethel? I hope Lady Grant is quite well again.'

'Oh yes, thank you; and, do you know, Archie is coming home to-morrow? We just missed each other in London. Won't you be glad to see him, Mrs. Erskine. It is two years since he went away.'

'Ay, two years past on the thirteenth of June. It is a long holiday, Miss Ethel.'

'Yes, but you know Archie has not been quite idle, Mrs. Erskine. He has studied a good deal, and I know at St. Malo he was always about with the fishermen gathering up all sorts of information. I think him greatly improved, and I'm sure so will you.'

'I don't know. Perhaps we did not see any need for improvement, Miss Ethel,' said Janet Erskine, with a slow smile. 'At least that's what the skipper will tell you.'

'Oh, I have so longed to see the skipper, Mrs. Erskine. I see the *Janet Rae* is not in the harbour. And how is Annie?'

'Annie is quite well.'

That was all, and it was said curtly, and with a slight compression of the lips, which made Ethel wonder.

'Where is she to-day, Mrs. Erskine?'

'In the garden at the lines, Miss Ethel. Nobody can see her there, you know. If there was anybody but me to do the lines, Annie wouldn't. She hates it, but she won't let me touch them.'

'She never sits about with the rest at the front doors, Mrs. Erskine.'

'I think I see Annie doing that! There is a mighty difference between her, Miss Ethel, and the other girls in the Haven, and she prides herself in it.'

'But she is always good and dutiful to you, and would do anything for you and the skipper, I am sure.'

'I am not complaining,' said Janet Erskine quietly. 'She is not an idle girl. I can't say that.'

There was a lack of heartiness in that meagre praise which somehow chilled Ethel as she listened. Had some cloud arisen between Janet Erskine and her adopted daughter? She would soon find out.

'I think I'll go out and see Annie, Mrs. Erskine.'

'Very well, Miss Ethel, and I'll get your tea ready. Do you remember the little brown teapot you admired so much? It got broken when you were away, and Annie walked to Eyemouth and searched through every shop in the town till she got one to match it. She said she wanted you to find everything the same when you came back.'

'Dear Annie! I hope everything is the same. I am afraid of changes, and of new things. Everything old and familiar is best, in my eyes at least,' said Ethel, as she rose to pass out into the garden. She had a vague sense of misgiving even as she spoke; the changes she feared had already become realities. There had been some curious upheavals in the Erskine family of late, and the peace and unity of the household was broken, never again to be restored. Perhaps it was Annie's blame.

Ethel Grant stood for a minute just within the kitchen door, and looked at Annie Erskine, where she sat on her low stool, with the brown masses of the lines all about her feet. She was not working at that moment, nor was she conscious that any one was observing her.

Her arm was leaning on her knee, her cheek rested in her firm brown hand, and her eyes were fixed on the distant hills, with a far-off, troubled expression. Of what was she thinking? It would not be easy to divine. She did not know what a picture she made, but Ethel Grant's artistic eye took in every detail. The lissom figure, which even the coarse, badly-cut serge dress could not make ungraceful, the dainty foot and ankle, the rounded arm, and, above all, the well-poised, proud, little head, with its crown of red-gold hair, and the exquisitely featured face illumined by the large, deep blue eye, made Annie Erskine a lovely woman. Would her dower of beauty bring her weal or woe? Ah, who could tell?

Ethel Grant did not like that grave, deeply-troubled look on Annie's face. She was still silently wondering about it, when Major, careering wildly round the house, caught sight

of Annie Erskine, and rushed upon her with a bound and a joyous bark.

The girl leaped to her feet with a sudden startled air, and looked round, expectantly, for Major's mistress.

'Dear Annie, how are you? I am so very glad to see you.'

'So am I, Miss Ethel,' said Annie, and their hands met in the clasp of friendship, and for a moment they looked into each other's eyes. There was a gulf between them, but love had bridged it over.

'May I kiss you, Annie?'

'If you please, Miss Ethel,' Annie answered simply. So they kissed each other for the first time.

'Will you take my stool, Miss Ethel?' she said, sweeping aside the lines with her hand. 'Yes, do, I can sit on this basket. When did you come back?'

'Only yesterday, and I am so glad to be at home again. Why, Annie, do you know you look perfectly lovely?'

'Do I, Miss Ethel?'

The girl spoke quite unconcernedly, and she took up the line she had been baiting, and proceeded with her work.

'Do you like touching these sticky things, Annie?'

'Like it! It is my work, Miss Ethel. I must not think whether I like it or not. I have to do it to save mother. You would not like me to leave it to her, would you?'

She spoke like Janet Erskine, purely and correctly, but her voice was clear and sweet as a bell, and had none of Janet's harsher ring.

'How good you are, Annie! I'm afraid I am not so thoughtful for my mother as you are for yours,' said Ethel soberly. 'And how and where is Adam, Annie?'

'Father and Adam have gone to the deep sea fishing, and the boats will be in with the tide in the morning,' Annie announced composedly, though the colour heightened a little in her cheek.

'Come, now, tell me all that has been going on in the Haven since I went away, Annie. What weddings are to be after the "draive" this year?'

'I don't know, Miss Ethel. I never pay any heed to these things.'

'What *do* you heed, you naughty girl? I wonder will you take any heed when your own wedding comes off? When is it to be?'

'I'll be angry, Miss Ethel, if you tease me like that.'

'Will you? How funny to see you angry! Are you very terrible, Annie? Come, now, tell me what you were thinking of when Major so unceremoniously interrupted you. Your thoughts were very far away, Annie; as far away, I believe, as the deep sea fishing. Eh?'

'I could not tell my thoughts even to you, Miss Ethel,' said the girl, quite gravely, and without heeding the significance of Miss Grant's last words. 'They were very wicked.'

'Wicked, Annie! Oh, nonsense. And you so very, very good.'

'I am not good at all. I am wicked and ungrateful. I was thinking of things a fisher girl has no right to think about. I am making myself and others miserable, Miss Ethel.'

'Annie! What about?'

'Oh, Miss Ethel, dear, I wish I could tell you,' cried Annie Erskine, and a great trembling shook her. 'After you went away they told me, and I have been miserable ever since.'

'What did they tell you?'

'That I am not father and mother's child. Why did they tell me, Miss Ethel, when I was so content and happy? I am not so now.'

There was a ring of pain in the sweet young voice which went straight to Ethel's gentle heart. She drew nearer to her, and laid her soft hand very quietly on Annie's bare arm.

'They had to tell you, Annie, I think, because of Adam.'

'Why because of him?' cried Annie, rebelliously, and in her agitation she flung off Ethel's clinging hand. 'We were far happier as brother and sister than we can ever be again. It was a shame, a cruel shame!'

Ethel Grant looked at Annie Erskine with troubled eyes. The flushed face, the flashing eye, the heaving bosom indicated the surging of deep feelings in the heart. There was a great change in Annie Erskine. Where was the bright, blithe-faced, happy-hearted girl from whom she had parted with sunny jest and laughter only a few months before? Janet Erskine had told her then of their intention to tell Annie about her birth, and Ethel had once or twice wondered how she would receive the romantic story. Curiously enough, it had come upon her as an absolute surprise. Perhaps twenty years had made the memory of that storm rather dim to the Haven folk. But the revelation had not had any good result. Perhaps, after all, thought Ethel, it might have been better to have withheld all when they could tell so little.

But it had been the work of Adam Erskine the younger. It is easy to guess the reason why.



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CHAPTER IV.

A TROUBLED HEART.

BUT after a while, Annie,' said Ethel Grant, with gentle gravity, 'you will forget all these unpleasant thoughts, and settle down again in happiness and contentment as before.'

Annie shook her head.

'I am afraid I shall never be content, any more, Miss Ethel; in the Haven, at least. I want to know what went before that miserable wreck. There must be somebody belonging to me in the world. I want to find that person.'

'Annie, dear, I don't know very much, but I have a feeling that you would be far happier if you could make up your mind to think no more about it. If there had been anybody very anxious about you, don't you think you would have been sought and found long ago?'

Annie Erskine cast down her eyes, and pointed with a contemptuous finger to the bait-basket and the lines lying on the gravelly path.

'Working among these things all my days, Miss Ethel. Yes, I'll be very happy,' she said, with bitterness. 'As long as it is for father, I like to do it, because I love him,' she said, with a break in her voice; 'but after he is away (some day, he says, he will sail away in the *Janet Rae*, and never come back), and what will I do then?'

'You would have your mother, Annie, and Adam.'

'I know I am a wicked, ungrateful girl, Miss Ethel, but I haven't felt to mother lately as I ought. She was not kind about the story when it was told me,' said Annie, with a flash of her beautiful eyes. 'I do not know why they told me at all, if they could not tell me all. She would not answer a single question scarcely about my own mother. Was it not quite natural that I should want to know all about her?'

'Yes, it was quite natural; but perhaps your mother might feel a little jealousy even of the dead, Annie. You know she has very deep feelings, and that she loves you very much.'

'If she is jealous of the dead, and there is no more to tell than I know now, why was I told at all?' repeated Annie, rebelliously. 'I was far happier before.'

'It had to be told, Annie, I know, because of Adam,' repeated Ethel Grant, for it was quite evident that the girl did not even yet understand the reason.

'Why because of Adam?' demanded Annie Erskine, turning her large clear eyes calmly on her companion's face.

'Because he loves you, Annie; not as a brother. The only happy ending I can see is for you to marry Adam.'

Annie Erskine flung the lines from her, and sprang to her feet, the dusky colour flashing hotly in her cheek.

'If that is what they mean, they have made a mistake,' she said curtly. 'Let us go in now and see if mother has the tea ready.'

'Not yet, Annie. You are vexed with me.'

'Oh no, not with you; only you do not understand.'

The girl passed her hand with a sudden, quick gesture across her brow.

'You look very reproachfully at me, Miss Ethel. If I say more, perhaps you will not speak to me again at all. But I cannot help that. I know they have done a great deal for me; that they kept me from going to the poorhouse, where I suppose I should have gone but for them. But if I am to pay

them back by marrying Adam, they have made a mistake. I shall never be Adam Erskine's wife.'

'Why, Annie? I am sure he is good and true.'

'Oh, I know very well what he is. Have I not known him all my life? But he is only my brother. Rather than marry him, Miss Ethel, I would drown myself in the sea. *That* would not be very hard, not nearly so hard as living through some things in the world.'

She looked as if she would put her threat into execution, yet she did not speak excitedly. Her manner had grown calm and quiet again. Ethel could only sigh. She felt vaguely that this girl was beyond her, that there were depths in her nature she did not understand. Did Annie Erskine herself understand her own rebellious longings? I fear not.

Before any more could be said, Janet Erskine called to them that the tea was ready, and bade them come in without delay.

'Are you not coming in, Annie?' asked Ethel, as the girl seated herself on the stool, and took up her line again.

'Not just yet. Tell mother I have been idling my time, and that I would stop for a little while,' answered Annie. So Ethel re-entered the house, feeling that the girl was best left alone.

It had always been Ethel Grant's custom to drink a cup of tea with the Erskines when she made an afternoon's call at the Haven, and many a pleasant minute, filled with sunny jest and laughter, had been spent over it. But a cloud had risen above the skipper's cottage. Ethel felt its chill shadow on her heart as she sat down in the old man's chair.

'Well, and what do you think of Annie this time, Miss Ethel?' asked Janet Erskine, as she poured out the tea. It was evident from her manner that the answer was of some moment to her.

'I am troubled and anxious about Annie, Mrs. Erskine. She is very much changed.'

'Do you think so? In what way?'

'She is not so light-hearted as she was.'

'No, she has never been the same since New Year, when father told her that she did not really belong to us.'

'She had never even heard a hint of such a thing, then?'

'Never a hint.'

'Most extraordinary, in a gossiping place like this!'

'But Annie never mixes with the Haven folks, Miss Ethel, and you never spoke of it no more than we did; so she had no way of knowing. It was Adam made father tell her.'

'I fancied so. Adam must care a great deal for her, I think.'

'Ay, too much,' said Janet Erskine, with a bitter dryness. 'It isn't care nor love with him—it's worship, Miss Ethel. He'd lie down and let her walk on him. And when a man gets to think so little of himself, Miss Ethel, there's an end to all peace. A sober affection is the best; many a time have I told him that.'

'And what about Annie, Mrs. Erskine? Do you think she will marry him?'

'Marry him! Of course she will, and be glad, as she ought. She won't pick up another like him in a hurry. Just let her try if she can. If she doesn't marry the lad, what is to become of her? She can't have father and me all her days.'

'No,' Ethel admitted, with a sigh. She saw trouble in store for Annie Erskine. It was plain she would not walk in the way mapped out for her. She keenly resented being disposed of as the Erskines had planned.

'Though I say it of my own son, Miss Ethel, there are few like Adam,' said Janet Erskine presently, with a slow, quiet pride. 'He is not only well-looking, he is good. Whatever Annie may think, she'll never get a better husband. And if she isn't kind to Adam, I'll find it very hard to forgive her.'

'But, Mrs. Erskine, if Annie does not love Adam as she should love the man she marries, she cannot help that. She

has always looked on him as her brother. It would be very difficult for her to think of him in any other way. You must be just to Annie as well as to Adam.'

'Why should she not love him as a wife should? She has known him all her life. Where will she get another half so good? I have always meant them to marry, and so has father. All our gear, and it is a goodly pickle now, will go to them. It would be very stupid of them not to marry, I think.'

Ethel rose rather wearily to her feet. The discussion vexed and wearied her. Her sympathies were entirely with Annie, as was natural, but she could not refuse to admit the fitness of Janet Erskine's planning. It offered, certainly, the easiest and most satisfactory solution of a grave difficulty, but— Is there not very often a 'but' to all human planning? We need to be reminded at times that Omnipotence does not dwell on earth.

It is only the Creator who can order and provide for the creature. Janet Erskine was not peculiar in her forgetfulness of this. Hers is a singularly common failing. Ethel Grant saw that her mind was absolutely fixed concerning Annie's destiny.

'I don't know what to say, Mrs. Erskine. But you will be gentle with Annie. She is your child almost as much as Adam. Don't hurry or force her. She feels things so in her heart.'

'Everything we do will be for her good, Miss Ethel,' said Janet, with a slight stiffness. 'It is because we love her like our own we are willing for Adam to marry her. It is not every girl a mother willingly gives up her son to, Miss Ethel, as you may learn when you are a mother yourself. And I don't think it a good thing for girls to be left entirely to themselves when it comes to marrying. They should be guided by those who are older and know better than they do.'

'Perhaps you are right, Mrs. Erskine; but I cannot help thinking that some marriages are best left to guide themselves.

There are things, you know, in which even young girls have a right to judge for themselves,' said Ethel Grant, with spirit. 'I hope my parents will never compel me to marry a man I don't love.'

'You will promise, though, Miss Ethel, not to influence Annie, or put her against Adam?'

'I put Annie against Adam, Mrs. Erskine! I assure you I would do just the opposite. I think Adam a splendid fellow, and so does papa. So will Annie, some day, perhaps, but you must leave her alone for a little. She is not the kind of girl to force into things.'

'She has too many whims and notions for me, Miss Ethel,' said Janet Erskine, almost sourly. 'When I was young, girls did as they were bid, and never were consulted about what they liked or didn't like. It was a better way than now. Well, are you going away, Miss Ethel?'

'Yes, I must; mamma will have had her nap, and will be looking for me. Archie will be home to-morrow, didn't I tell you? He will not be long of coming down to renew his acquaintance with you all. Just think. He has not seen the Haven for two long years. Oh, I must tell you. In his very last letter I got at grandmamma's, he asked about Annie. Just imagine what he called her, Mrs. Erskine. The Pearl of Orr's Haven. Was it not pretty? I forgot to tell Annie.'

'Don't tell her, Miss Ethel. The child's head is pack full of nonsense. She thinks enough of her pretty face. I scold father wiles for speaking so plainly about it to her, but he thinks Annie won't spoil. Good-bye, then. Give my respects to Lady Grant and Sir Archie.'

'Good-bye, Mrs. Erskine. Be kind to Annie,' said the young lady, smiling, as she shook hands and went off, Major following at her heels. She did not go back to the garden. Somehow, after her talk with Janet Erskine, she felt that she would rather not see Annie again that day.

As she wended her way slowly up the steep slope of the

village brae to the high road, her thoughts were wholly of the girl she had left. She felt convinced that this was the beginning of trouble for Annie Erskine, and her kind heart was busy devising plans to help and comfort her. She saw that Janet Erskine was steeling herself against her adopted child. So long as she had been subservient in every particular, and had not thwarted her in any desire or aim, all went well; but now that Annie had grown to womanhood, and seemed disposed to claim for herself a woman's privileges, Janet Erskine rose up in arms. Perhaps had the thing not concerned Adam's happiness, she might not have felt so bitter. Janet Erskine had her good points, but she was a hard and selfish woman at heart. At the lodge gates of St. Veda's Ethel Grant met her father on horseback. He looked well there: the master of St. Veda's had still a tall, splendidly-proportioned figure, and he was thoroughly at home in the saddle. Twenty years had somewhat changed him, however, and he looked his years to the full. He drew rein outside the gates, and stooped from his saddle with a smile at sight of his best-loved child. The tie between Sir Archie and his fair, frail daughter was one of tender and abiding strength. That smile, however, did not quite conceal a certain anxious, even worried expression, which had struck Ethel the moment her eyes fell on her father's face.

'What is it, papa? Are you well, or are you vexed about something?' she asked anxiously.

'Neither, my darling,' he answered hastily. 'How have you enjoyed your walk? You have quite a rosy colour to-day.'

'Have I? Didn't I always say, papa, that nothing but the sea breezes of St. Veda's would make me well?' she said, as she patted Hero's beautiful neck with a caressing touch. 'Are you sure you are quite well, papa?'

Her tone was very anxious, and her eyes dwelt keenly on her father's loved face. It was a fine face, noble, honest, and true, the face of a good man.

'What notion have you taken, my sweet?' he said gaily. 'I am perfectly well. It is business that is troubling me. If you must know, you inquisitive elf, I am on my way to see Purves. He is worrying himself over a pretty story I shall tell, for your edification and mamma's, some day.'

'Oh, is that all?' said Ethel lightly. 'Why should you look so serious over Purves's vagaries? He has always one of some kind in hand.'

'Yes, but this is a trifle more serious than usual. It is possible even that it may take me to London. But we shall see. I must go now, as Purves leaves his office at half-past four, and, as you see, Hero does not at all approve of this delay.'

Ethel nodded and smiled, as her father gave the impatient animal the rein. She stood within the gates a moment watching him ride away, with all the love and pride of her heart in her eyes. When Sir Archie was away from the sweet gaze of those eyes his face clouded, and even slight dimness seemed to come before his eyes, blotting out the familiar landscape surrounding him.

'If it should be true; if there were a particle of foundation for it,' he muttered to himself, 'in what words should I break it to Ethel and her mother?'

Ethel Grant walked slowly up the avenue to the house, wondering what had happened to change the current of her thought. She had a curious feeling as if a cloud had suddenly fallen athwart the cheerful sunshine of the summer day. And yet there was no visible sign of any approaching gloom. The sweet west wind blew warm and fresh on her cheek, the sky was blue and brilliant, the glimpses of the sea through the easy greenness of the trees revealed a shimmering expanse with scarcely a ripple on its breast. She was glad, somehow, to reach the house, and she ran up at once to her mother's dressing room.

'Were you wearying for me, mamma? I have had such a

lovely walk. Had you a nice sleep, and is your headache gone ?

‘Quite gone, dear. I am glad you had a pleasant walk. Is it not very warm out of doors ?’

Lady Grant was not strong. The afternoon rest had become a necessary part of her life. She was still the same gentle, loving-hearted woman ; the centre of care and devotion wherever she went. She was, indeed, a frail creature, made for sunshine and happiness ; she seemed like one who would succumb at the first touch of sorrow or care. Neither of these had come near her since the day she had become Sir Archie’s wife.

Ethel had inherited her mother’s delicate constitution, but she possessed a brave spirit ; and there were hidden in her heart capabilities for endurance and womanly courage which were destined yet to amaze those who knew her.

‘And what did you find in the Haven after your long exile ?—a warm welcome, I know,’ said Lady Grant, with interest. ‘Tell me all the news. How is Anne Erskine ?’

‘She is very well in health, mamma, but there are other things wrong. Trouble has been brewing in the Haven in my absence.’

‘What kind of trouble ?’

‘With the Erskines. It has made Annie miserable, mamma.’

‘What ? The knowledge that she is only their adopted child ? Then she cannot care for Adam as he cares for her.’

‘Not at present, I am afraid.’

‘Will she ever care for him in that way do you think, Ethel ? Annie is a very dainty girl ; and though Adam is a dear, good, honest fellow, he is very uncouth.’

‘You are right, mamma ; he is not in the least like Annie. Mrs. Erskine is very hard and bitter against her—very unjustly, I think. Annie cannot help having these fine feelings,

and if she does not care for Adam in that way, how can they make her? I wish I could see the end of it.'

'I have always thought that Janet Erskine did not do quite right about the child. There ought to have been inquiries made at the time of the wreck. I have long thought that Annie must be of gentle birth. Did you ever notice her feet and hands, Ethel?'

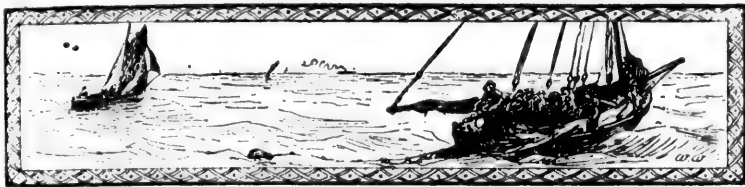
'Yes, mamma, I have; but what is to be done now? If she will not marry Adam, and I don't think she will, I am afraid Mrs. Erskine will make it very unpleasant for her. Her heart is quite set on the match.'

'If they make Annie unhappy among them without a cause, Ethel, we must just take care of her, my dear,' said Lady Grant, a trifle absently. 'Do you know if any one has called this afternoon? I thought I heard the sound of hoofs on the avenue when I was lying down.'

'It would be Hero's hoofs, mamma. Papa has gone to Reston to see Mr Purves.'

'Has he? Mr. Purves is always worrying your father about something. By this time to-morrow, dear, Archie should be here. He will stir us all up,' said Lady Grant, and a gleam of love for her absent son lit up her face.

Her heart was bound up in her one son, and the two years of his absence had seemed to her intolerably long. It had been his father's wish that the lad should see something of the world before settling down to the business of life. Sir Archie himself was no politician, but he destined his son for a political career, and with that aim in view he had been trained. Whether the fun-loving, happy-go lucky lad who, even when he had grown to young manhood, had loved nothing better than to go off with the herring boats, or cruise along the coast in the *Spitfire*, shooting sea-fowl with Adam Erskine, would settle down seriously to consider the weighty affairs of the nation, was a question time alone would decide.



CHAPTER V.

ARCHIE THE YOUNGER.

THE tide had turned at sunset, and was flowing in on the pebbly shore at Orr's Haven with a subdued and musical murmur which mingled pleasantly with the hum of voices in the still evening air. It was a lovely summer night, and most of the Haven folk were out of doors. The sea wall was lined with fishermen smoking their pipes of peace, and the harbour was filled with the boats which would go off again in the morning. It was a picturesque scene, enhanced by the radiance cast by the sunset glow, which still lingered redly on sea and shore. The light was getting very grey, when there came striding manfully down the village brae the stalwart figure of a youth wearing a light covert coat and a tweed cap. The fragrant scent of his cigar was wafted to the loungers at the wall even before he came in sight.

'It's Maister Airchie, deil tak' him,' said Danny Webster, a cross-grained old mariner, who had outlived his time. 'There'll no be muckle peace i' the Haven noo, lads.'

But though Danny said, 'Deil tak' him,' there were others who said, 'Bless the laddie,' in their hearts, for Archie Grant the younger was even a greater favourite in the village than Sir Archie himself.

'Hulloa! Good evening boys; and how's the world using

you all, eh?' he called out while he was yet a hundred yards off. In a moment they had closed about him, gripping him by the hand and bidding him, with one voice, a hearty welcome home.

'So you're glad to see me back, lads?' he said cheerily. 'Not half so glad as I am to *be* back. Hulloa, Danny, are *you* living yet? We'll maybe get our cruise in the *Katy Ann* yet. What! Won't you shake hands with an old chum? Aye keeping up the grudge against the laddie who stuffed your chimney with divots, eh? That was Adam Erskine's idea, not mine, Danny. There's not as much originality in me. And how's everybody? Who's born, and married, and dead in the Haven since I went away, eh? None of the latter, I know, when I see Danny. He said he'd be in the mools before I came back. Danny, your not a man of your word.'

Just the old teasing, fun-loving lad come back to them unchanged. Their hearts warmed to him as they looked on his bronzed and handsome face.

'He's clean wud,' said Danny, in a loud whisper, which sent Archie off into fits of laughter.

'Thank you, Danny; you'll keep me from having too canty a conceit of myself,' he said, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Come, give me all the news. Johnny Frater, what knotty point are you exercised about just now?'

Johnny Frater was the keenest politician and arguer in the Haven, and followed the course of national events with a terrible interest. Her Majesty's Ministers and the Imperial Parliament periodically received very curious denunciations at the hands of Johnny. He had a choice *repertoire*, and nothing pleased Archie Grant better than to get this worthy started on a favourite grievance, and hear his original remarks.

'So ye're gaunna staun' for the Shire, Maister Archie, the Laird tells me?' said Johnny, with a broad grin. 'We'll hae to put ye in at the heid o' the poll. Wull we no'?'

'Of course, Johnny, anything less would be unworthy of the Haven and of Johnny Frater.'

'Ay, an' ye'll hae to hand forth i' the schule. My certy, see if we dinna gie ye a guid hecklin'. Ye'll hae to hae a' yer views weel reld up, my man, or we'll foonder ye.'

'I believe ye, Johnny. Well, if I ever stand for the Shire, and if I am elected, I'll move for better legislation for the fisher folk, my lads. I've been keeping my eyes open while I've been away, and I've made up my mind on a few points. The harbours and the trawlers will catch it from me, you can depend on that. But there's plenty of time to decide all these matters yet. It's Haven needs I want. How's the skipper? He's at home, isn't he? I thought I saw the *Jewel Bae* at anchor this afternoon.'

'Ay, she's in. The skipper's failed terrible this while, but the rest are as brisk as bees. There's to be a waddin' at the skipper's after the draive.'

'Oh, is there? I haven't heard that,' said Archie Grant, with an indifference he was far from feeling.

'Oo, ay, they're wantin' to keep a' their gear to theirsels,' said Danny Webster spitefully. 'They say the lassie's no' carin' about him; but if Jen Erskine's set her mind on the waddin', it'll be, if the world should come till an end. She's a thrawn limmer, if ever there was yin.'

'After the draive? That isn't long. Is it really to take place?' asked the young laird, looking for some more authentic information than that given by Danny's cantankerous tongue.

Then the whole gossip of the place was poured into his ears; but after the talk had drifted away from the Erskines, Archie Grant continued to glance occasionally towards their cottage, where the light gleamed steadily out upon the gathering darkness.

'Well, lads, there's aye something happening,' he said at length. 'I must away to-night, though. I'll just step

across and ask for the skipper first. Good night to you all just now.'

With a nod and a smile he strode across the road, and rapped with the head of his cane at the skipper's door. It was opened by Adam the younger. Tall though the young Laird was, the skipper's son towered a head above him. Both were handsome men. Adam Erskine, still lacking the refinement and grace of his compeer, had a manly presence and an open, honest countenance, lit by an eye which had never feared the face of man. He was a giant in strength, but had the heart of his father, which was as that of a child in purity and tenderness.

'Hulloa, Adam!'

'Hulloa, Maister Airchie!'

Such was their greeting, but their hands met as it was uttered in the strong grasp of fealty and love. They had been inseparable playmates in boyhood, and many a daring deed and act of mischievous fun had they done both on land and sea. 'Twa deils!' Danny Webster had always characterized them. 'Perfeck deils, or they wadna be leevin'.'

'Come in, come in, Maister Airchie. Faither 'll be fell proud to see ye,' Adam said, as he held open wide the door. But the skipper had heard the familiar voice, and in a moment was at the kitchen door with outstretched hand and smile of heartiest welcome in his fine rugged face.

'Eh, laddie, come in, come in. Yer very fit, like the callant's in the sang, has music in't,' he said cheerily. 'Janet, my ooman, here's the young Laird.'

Even Janet Erskine thawed at sight of that winsome face, and with a smile she too bade him welcome home.

As Archie Grant advanced into the kitchen, he cast one swift, expectant glance round, and satisfied himself that Annie was absent, then he sat down on the table and folded his arms across his broad chest.

'Well, I must say it is pleasant to see all the kent faces. They were telling me you were growing old, skipper, but I see very little difference,' he said cheerily.

'Ay, but lad, the auld timbers is gettin' stiff. They'll no' be lang or they're no' seaworthy,' said the skipper. 'Ye're grown a fell braw callant yersel', my man. Can ye no' sit doon on a chair wiselike, an' gies yer crack?'

'I can't crack much to-night. You know I only got home by the four train, and I left my father in the dining-room just when he was as anxious for my crack as anybody. I only wanted to shake hands and ask for everybody.'

'Ay, we're a weel that's here. Whaur's Annie, mither?'

'How should I know?' answered Janet Erskine, with a kind of snappish dryness which struck Archie Grant very unpleasantly.

'Oh, I thoct ye micht hae set her on an errant,' said the skipper meekly. 'There's Adam, too, wi' never a word to say for himsel'. There's a strappin' chap for ye, Maister Airchie.'

'Ay, is he. Well, Adam, when are we to have another night at the herring fishing? Do you mind our last escapade?'

'Div I no'?' asked Adam, with his quiet smile. 'It was neither your blame nor mine, Maister Airchie, that we werena drooned langsyne.'

'You're right. Perhaps we bear a charmed life, or maybe we have some mischief to do in the world yet,' said the young laird lightly. 'Well, I'm off. Good night, Mrs Erskine; good night, skipper. A safe voyage and good luck to the *Janet Rae*. I'll be down when you come in. I'm going to have some fun in the Haven this summer.'

'But, my lad, you have grown a man noo,' said the skipper, with a twinkle in his eye. 'It'll hardly dae for oor Parliamentary candidate to be cairryin' on wi' daft laddie tricks. Ye'll hae to tak' up yer heid wi' the wechty affairs o' the nation noo, my man.'

'Isn't it a shame, skipper? My father hates politics, and is going to shift his responsibility on to my shoulders. How can he expect me to take to them as a duck takes to the water? Johnny Frater is in great glee, Adam, at the prospect of hearing me holding forth in the school. I don't know whether he or Danny will be the worst critic.'

'Oh, ye'll dae for Johnny an' Danny and them a' when ye begin, Maister Airchie,' said Adam, as he followed him to the door, where they lingered a moment, as if loth to part. Did something whisper to either, I wonder, that never again should they so part with the old love and peace in their hearts?

'Man, Adam, I'm glad to see you again. Just imagine we are four-and-twenty now. I think, on the whole, laddie-time is best. It worries me to think that I have a purpose to fulfil, and that life is all before me to make or to mar. You and I were never visited with such serious thoughts in the days when we cruised away on our own account in the *Janet Rae*. Why are you so awfully sober, Adam?'

'Ye're richt about the laddie-time,' said Adam, with some bitterness, and a momentary clouding of his open, pleasant face. 'Things look different at four-an'-twenty frae what they lid at fourteen.'

'Oh, but we'll be jolly fellows for a long time yet, my lad. Good night, old fellow; no use pulling a long face over it, for we'll never grow any younger now.'

So with a hearty grip they parted, and Archie Grant strode off whistling as if he had not a care or responsibility in the world.

It was now quite dark, but a glorious moon was rising redly at the edge of the sea; and as Archie Grant strolled round by the cliffs, the weird and exquisite light began to touch the surface of the water. He paused once or twice, and looked out to sea with admiring eyes. In all his far travels, he told himself, he had seen nothing finer than the rugged

coast line and the familiar waters of his native land. He felt in no hurry to go home. There were some things he wanted to think out, so he lighted another cigar, and strolled leisurely along the firm belt of sand skirting the base of the cliffs. The tide had only begun to flow, and at high water there was no footing under the cliffs. What frowning, mighty rocks they were! hollowed out by the roll of many a wild billow, and intersected with caves and fissures once dear to the smuggler's soul. Many an old story was told of the lawless days of the smugglers, and many a precious hoard has been hidden in the very shadow of St. Veda's itself. There was a curious stairway cut out of the solid face of the rock, and giving ascent to the battlements of the Castle; a means of access used by very few. It had always been Archie Grant's favourite way home from the village at ebb tide, and many a hairbreadth escape he had made risking the 'near cut' in perilous conditions, which would have horrified his mother had she been aware of them. But Archie Grant had always told just as much as he dared at home, and they really did not know what a hare-brained, reckless boy he had always been. The fisher folk knew, however, and only loved him the more. Archie Grant was disappointed over his home-coming to Orr's Haven. He had pictured it often and often in his imagination, and the reality seemed a very commonplace affair. He even felt impatient of it, as he knocked the ashes from his cigar. Why had he found it so poor after all? Because he had missed Annie Erskine's smile, which was of more account in his eyes than it had any right to be. Oh, but this young life, when love takes it in hand, is a tangled web!

Why had Archie Grant not asked for Annie Erskine by name that night? Why had the announcement that a marriage between her and Adam was in contemplation gone to his heart with a sudden bitter sting? Why did everything seem dull, flat, and unprofitable, because he had not looked on her sweet face? The old story. Ay, but in this instance it

might have been better had there been no old story, however sweet. For what could there be in common between Annie Erskine and the heir of St. Veda's? She belonged to the people; nay, she was Adam Erskine's by virtue of all his father and mother had done for her. What more fitting or beautiful, Archie Grant asked himself bitterly, than that they two should wed, and live a length of useful, happy days in the cottage, as Adam Erskine the elder and his wife had done before them? There *could* be no other ending; and yet to picture Annie Erskine spending her life in that two-roomed cottage, bringing up Adam's children and attending to his fishing gear, as did the other wives and mothers in the Haven, seemed perfectly intolerable to Archie Grant. He tossed away his cigar, half smoked, and audibly called himself a 'confounded fool.' Nevertheless the sore, bitter, unhappy sensation remained.

Suddenly he caught sight of something which made his heart give a great bound. It was only a girl's figure in a dark dress, sitting on a big boulder, with a little shawl drawn cornerwise over her bare golden head, and her face turned out to sea. Her attitude struck Archie strangely. It was dejected, and the expression in her face, as well as he could see it, seemed unspeakably sad. Why, if Adam Erskine and she were betrothed lovers, was she here on the lonely shore? and why, if she was on the brink of a happy bridal, did her face wear the downcast look? An unspeakable longing rushed into the heart of Archie Grant. Here was his opportunity; here he could hear from Annie's own lips whether she had missed him; here they could meet and talk unobserved. He took a step forward, when suddenly the thought of Adam Erskine struck him—Adam the honest and true, who loved this girl with a great love. Why should he seek to come between them, to cast any shadow on their happiness and peace?

In his hesitation he stood still, but Annie turned her head

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suddenly, as if conscious of an approaching presence, and he knew that she saw him.

She rose hurriedly to her feet and drew her wrap yet further over her head, but not until he had seen the quick and burning blush which rose to her face and dyed it red.





CHAPTER VI.

CROSS CURRENTS.

I AM afraid I have startled you. I have been at the Haven, and came round this way because I like it best,' Archie said gently, and he did not know why he could not speak her name. He held out his hand, and Annie laid hers in it for a moment, but did not speak. The motion caused the wrap to fall back from her head, and she stood before him in all her fair young beauty, making his heart thrill and his pulses throb with an exquisite happiness. Could it be that the love he had flouted and laughed at as a fable and romance had come to him at last? It seemed a very real and momentous thing at that moment to Archie Grant.

'I must go away home,' said Annie, at length, and her voice sounded a little unsteady. 'I should not be here so late, but one gets tired of sitting in the house. Were you there?'

'Yes.'

'You would see them all, then?'

'Yes, all but you, and it was you I wanted to see.'

It was as if he had lost control of himself. Every thought or misgiving concerning Adam Erskine had fled at the nearer sight of Annie.

She drew her shawl close over her head, for her colour rose and her mouth trembled.

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'They will be very glad up at the Castle,' she said gravely.

'Why?'

'Because you have come back.'

'I think they are, though I am not very much to be glad about. But I suppose it is a poor dog that isn't missed a little.'

'So they say.'

'There are some changes in Orr's Haven since I went away, Annie.'

The sweet, familiar name fell at last from his lips with a lingering cadence.

'Not many. I cannot think of one,' she answered quietly.

'There are some important ones impending, I am told,' pursued Archie.

'Are there? I have not heard of them; but we never do hear much of the gossip. I was speaking to Danny Webster yesterday, though, and he was bewailing your home-coming.'

A ripple of amusement dawned on her face as she said these words. She had quite recovered from her evident agitation at Archie Grant's sudden appearance, and her beautiful eyes could now meet his without a falter.

'Ay, Danny's a queer beggar. It was he who told me of one change I had not anticipated, and which I can hardly believe.'

'Danny is a gossip-gatherer, and it's all fish that goes in his reel,' laughed Annie. 'What was his newest news?'

'Your marriage, Annie.'

'My marriage! They see far forward, surely,' Annie answered quietly, but her bosom heaved.

'He told me you and Adam Erskine are to be married after the drive.'

'It is not true.'

She was very angry he could see. Her eyes flashed, and the denial fell short, sharp, and bitter from her set lips. Her face even grew pale. Archie Grant had never seen his old playmate in this mood. Perhaps in Annie herself was the greatest change of all.

'Then you are not going to marry Adam, Annie?'

'I have told you. Ask Miss Ethel. She knows all about it.'

'It will be a terrible disappointment for Adam, poor fellow,' said Archie compassionately. Perhaps now he could afford to be very kind to Adam.

'What have you to do with his disappointment, or with my life?' said Annie, with sudden, swift passion. 'You do not belong to our class. Let us be happy or miserable in our own way.'

'What has come over you, Annie? You are terribly changed,' asked Archie, almost anxiously. He did not add what he felt, that this Annie was a thousand times more winsome than the Annie of old. 'Ethel told me to-day that you know now that you are not the skipper's daughter,' he said, presently, when she made no answer. 'Did'—

'If they had only left me as I was,' Annie interrupted, in her wild, impetuous way. 'They have only made me miserable. But, if they persecute me, I must leave them, that is all.'

'Persecute you, Annie! They would never do such a thing. Have they not always been most kind?'

'Oh yes! I have never said anything but that. They have been too kind. They have laid on me a debt of gratitude I shall never be able to repay. Perhaps if I was to marry as they wish, they might feel themselves repaid; but I shall never, never do that!'

'Why?'

'Because my life is my own, and I cannot live it just as other people plan.'

'But, Annie, Adam Erskine is a splendid fellow. I am sure you would be happy with him,' urged Archie, trying to be loyal to his old friend; but his eyes told a different tale. He was amazed at the change in the girl before him. It was a twofold change. Her physical beauty had developed marvellously in the past two years; mind and heart seemed developing, too, and awaking to the possibilities of life.

'Yes, Adam Erskine is a splendid fellow,' Annie repeated, with a strange mixture of mockery and pathetic earnestness. 'It is a pity I cannot see just as others see. Good night; I must go home.'

'Annie, I am disappointed in my home-coming. I thought about you a great deal when I was away,' said Archie impulsively, not caring what he said, so that he kept her a little longer.

'Did you?'

Nothing could be more unconcerned than her utterance of these two words, but she turned her head away a little, and looked out upon the shimmering, moonlit sea.

'I wonder, did you ever give your old chum a thought, Annie?' he said, very reproachfully. 'I don't believe you ever did.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Then you did not miss me even a little, Annie, and I was a fool to think about you at all,' he said, with bitterness.

'Perhaps you were,' she said carelessly, but the sweet colour rose rapidly in her cheek. She could not keep *that* back, though she would.

'Are we to be friends then, Annie?'

'Yes, why not?'

'It won't be very easy to be friends now, Annie.'

'Perhaps not; I forgot. You have seen the world, and I have seen nothing. We are very ignorant here in the Haven; but it is not our blame. One cannot learn where there is no opportunity.'

'This is not fair, Annie.'

'Why not?'

She drew her wrap round her with a quick, nervous gesture, and a slight shiver shook her.

'Annie, do you know you are perfectly lovely? In all my travels I have never seen any woman so fair as the Pearl of Orr's Haven.'

'You must not speak like that to me, if you please,' said Annie quietly, but with an unmistakeable touch of hauteur. Yes, there was in Annie Erskine a great change. The child had become a woman, and as such she must be treated. Many a speech of a like kind had Archie Grant uttered in the old days, when they had rambled together along the cliffs, or drifted idly in the *Spitfire* about the little coves and inlets; speeches which Annie had laughed at, and answered back with quick repartee and careless banter, but it was all at an end. Had something sweeter and more serious come in its place?

'But you will let me see you sometimes, Annie. I cannot bear to think that the old friendship is gone for ever,' he said, almost humbly. 'I will promise to behave just as you would like, and not to say anything to offend you.'

'The old days never can come back,' said Annie, with a ring of weariness in her voice. 'I do think the world a miserable place.'

'Not always, nor necessarily. It is a place in which two people can be boundlessly happy if they love each other,' said Archie, and took a step nearer to her. She was startled. Her eyes met his for a moment in one strange, swift, questioning glance, then she sped past him, and before he could recover from his surprise, she was out of sight. He hesitated a moment, not knowing whether he should follow, and then, acting on second thoughts, he continued his walk towards home. Annie had not forgotten him. *That* he knew, and for the present he asked no more.

Meanwhile, she was speeding along the sands as if something pursued her. Her head was down-bent, and she heard no one coming, till suddenly she ran up against a figure sharply turning one of the rugged promontories of the cliffs.

'Annie, bless me, what are ye fleein' at?' asked Adam Erskine, and he took her by the arm, and even drew her to his side, as if he had a right to do so. But Annie withdrew herself from his touch at once, with a little petted gesture.

'Nothing; I thought it was getting late, and I was hurrying, that's all. Where are *you* going?'

'I'm seekin' you. Where hae ye been?'

'Nowhere.'

'They've been wonderin' at hame. It's after nine, Annie.'

'Is it?'

Annie Erskine could be very cool and aggravating when she liked. She was so now, but Adam was very patient, perhaps too long-suffering for a girl like Annie. She was high-spirited herself, and liked daring in others. Archie Grant's demeanour better suited her mood, and yet Adam was manly as well as gentle. Women are strange creatures, and a many-sided study.

'If ye had bidden a wee langer at the Castle rock, ye wad maybe hae been drooned for yer pains. See, the water's in here already. Let me lift ye ower.'

'No, I can cross myself,' said Annie, and with a nimble bound she cleared the little inlet made by the incoming tide. She did not appear in the least disconcerted by the danger she might have been in. But then the sea had no terrors for her. She loved it, and in its roughest moods found the voice of a friend.

'The young Laird was i' the toon the nicht, Annie,' said Adam, when he was again by her side.

'Was he?'

Adam did not see her colour rise, and her words sounded indifferent enough.

'He was in oor hoose for a wee while. I think he was disappointed at no' seein' you.'

'Maybe.'

The girl's manner was not encouraging—it was cold enough to be unkind. But Adam Erskine had appeared at a most inopportune moment; just when Annie was wishing to be alone. Perhaps she had certain sweet words to ponder in her mind.

'Ye are awfu' short the nicht, Annie. Hae I offendit ye in ony way?' asked Adam anxiously.

'You! oh no; you never offend anybody.'

'I wadna offend *you* ony way, or hurt a hair o' yer heid, Annie,' said Adam, with a simple earnestness which went to Annie's heart. She had not a word to say. 'But ye've never been the same sin' ye kent ye didna belang to us,' he went on.

'No, *that* was a mistake,' said Annie quickly. 'I was happier not knowing than I am now.'

'It was my blame, Annie. I kent a' along that ye werena my sister, of course, an' after a while I began to wish ye didna think it yersel'. I am sure ye ken what way. I'll no' be in a hurry, Annie, if ye'll only promise that by and by ye'll think about me differently. It's for my wife I want ye, Annie. I hae lo'ed ye a' my life.'

Annie never spoke, and when Adam, in his quiet but impassioned pleading, stooped from his tall height trying to see her face, she turned it away. It was not a pleasant face at that moment. The tenderness had all died out of it, leaving it pale and stern and cold.

'I'm no' wantin' ye to be in a hurry, only to ken what I'm thinkin' on,' said Adam, taking courage from her silence. 'The auld folk's set on't, as ye ken. There's a guide pickle gear, an' the skipper says he'll build a twa-storey hoose for us on the Skule Brae. An' when I get a boat o' my ain—the *Bonnie Annie*, ye ken, that we've often spoken o' — we'll get a servant lass, for I wad never bear to see ye workin' amang my lines an' nets, Annie. If I had my way, ye wad never lift yer wee finger. But ye'll gie me some hope, Annie; it'll gar me work an' save wi' a faur better heart.'

Still Annie never spoke.

Poor Adam, instead of advancing his cause by dwelling on the plans the old folks had made for their future, only filled the rebellious heart at his side with bitter anger.

'Weel, what d'ye say, Annie? will we say next year?' said

Adam, trying again, but in vain, to see the dear face he loved. 'Mother thinks about August or September, afore the weather gets ower cauld, an' we'll hae a bit trip to Edinburgh, and maybe Glesca.'

'I'm not a bundle of goods to be bought and sold as they think fit. You can tell mother that next time she lays plans for me,' said Annie hotly, and her words fell chilly on Adam Erskine's ears and heart.

'What d'ye mean, Annie? Of course, it's for you to say when and where it's to be. There's naebody wantin' to buy and sell ye, lassie. But ye will tak' me some day. I couldna live withoot ye noo, I think. An' it's the best thing we can do. We canna aye hae father an' mother an' the auld house, ye ken, an' we're no' brither an' sister, whatever folk may say. It did weel eneuch when we were bairns, but it's different noo.'

They had now reached the village, and a few more steps, taken in silence, brought them to their own door.

Annie made a motion to enter at once, without uttering a word, good or bad, but Adam's strong yet gentle hand on her arm detained her.

'No' yet, Annie; ye maun say something to me, my dear.'

She looked up at him then with large, wide, calm eyes. Perhaps it was natural that she should compare his tall, loose frame with the graceful physique of the young Laird of St. Veda's. It was not Adam's blame, poor lad, that the comparison was not in his favour.

'Ye maun tell me afore I gang aff the morn, for we'll no' be at hame again for a week or mair,' said Adam earnestly. 'Ye winna say me nay a'thegither, Annie?'

'I must, Adam.'

Annie's voice rang out clear, cold, decisive as a bell in the still night air. 'You are only my brother, and I could never marry you, though I lived to be as old as Methusaleh, and tried to make up my mind to do it all the time!'

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CHAPTER VII.

WOUNDED PRIDE.

ANNIE went straight to the little sleeping-closet, which was the only corner in the house she could call her own, and shut herself in. It was a very tiny chamber, with a curious round window like a port-hole, which even in stormy weather Annie kept wide open. She sat down on the bed, and folding her arms across her chest began to think.

Adam went into the kitchen to find his mother sitting alone by the fire. The skipper was already fast asleep in the box-bed. Janet Erskine, for a wonder, was idle; the coarse blue jersey she had been knitting had fallen under the fender among the ashes. In her abstraction she had not noticed it, though a cinder was smouldering on her ball of wool.

‘Well, where’s Annie?’ she asked abruptly, turning her head at her son’s entrance.

‘Awa’ to her bed. The skipper’s sleepin’, I see. I’d better turn in, too, I suppose,’ said Adam, laying his cap on the window board, and sitting down to pull off his boots.

‘Where was she?’

‘Along the sands. I met her just round the corner.’

‘Imph! She would meet the Laird. He always goes home that way. Why is she away so huffy-like to her bed?’

'I vexed Annie the nicht, mithier. I think we've maybe no' done fair to her.'

'How? We have given her everything. She has been like our own bairn. She's a spoiled, petted thing, Adam, and she needs a firm hand to guide her.'

Janet Erskine did not lower her voice, and every word fell cold and distinct on Annie's ears as she sat on the bed in the lobby closet. Very well, too, did Janet Erskine know she would hear.

'Wheesht, mithier; she'll hear ye. I'm no' denyin' we've been guid till her, an' Annie kens that hersel',' said Adam, in a low voice. He felt in sore need of sympathy, and yet he felt no desire to ask it from his mother. Only, before he went away, he must make it clear to her what they might expect of Annie now.

'But what I've thocht an' spoken o' maun never be.'

'Why?'

'Because I ken brawly Annie disna feel that way an' never will,' said Adam. 'I'd better tell ye, mithier. I spoke till her the nicht, an' she gied me my answer.'

'Ay, what was that?'

Janet Erskine's voice had a rasping sound in it, and her eyes flashed ominously.

'She jist telt me plainly she would never marry me, an' I ken she's in earnest. I'm tellin' ye, mithier, because I want ye to pit it oot o' yer mind a'thegither. We'll try an' be as we were afore. I wish, noo, I had never socht to tell her anything about it,' said Adam, and he leaned his head on his hand. To see her idol thus dejected, made to suffer by a girl's careless hand, was bitter as gall to the proud heart of Janet Erskine.

'Ay, and where did Annie get her fine notions, I wonder? Who is she, a pauper child, to set herself above *my* son?' she said, with a slow, intense passion, half terrible to see.

Wheesht, mithier,' said Adam a trifle wearily. 'Ye dinna

understand Annie. It's no' that ava. She's thoct o' me as a brither ower lang, an' she canna change noo.'

'But, if she had a particle of gratitude in her, she would do anything for you, Adam.'

Listening to these words, Annie Erskine bit her white lips till they bled. It cost her a fearful effort to hear them, and keep silent.

'I'll tell you what it is, Adam. The Castle folk have spoiled her, and she actually thinks, I believe, that the young Laird himsel' might look at her. Oh, I have watched her. A vain, empty thing, Annie has grown of late. She is not the bairn she was, nor the bairn she ought to have been, brought up in this house. I'll never forgive her for this, Adam.'

'Wheesht, mither, ye dinna ken what ye are sayin'. Ye maunna forget that Annie's yer bairn nearly as muckle as I am, an' ye maunna mak' ony difference. She has never kent ony ither hame, an' she has aye been a guid bairn. It wad be a shame to turn again' her noo, jist because she winna dae exactly as we want an' hae planned.'

'Ay, ay, that's just what your father 'll say, Adam, and you'll both set me aside for that chit of a girl. Her face is fairer than mine, but she'd never sacrifice herself as I would for either of you. I doubt, Adam Erskine, the same house 'll not hold Annie and me after this.'

Adam sat up now, thoroughly alarmed. He had never seen his reticent, self-possessed mother so moved, and he feared the consequences. In his anxiety to smooth the way of life for the dear girl he loved, he forgot his own pain. Whatever happened to him, nothing must hurt or vex Annie.

'Mither, ye maun be reasonable. What for should the same hoose no haud Annie an' you? What wad ye dae wi' her? Whaur wad ye send her, noo?'

'Better than her's gone to service before, Adam, and will again. It would take the pride out of her. She knows nothing about the hardships of the world, and is not sensible

of her mercies. I'll speak to the minister's wife about getting her a place for six months. At the end of that time if she doesn't take you, ay, and gladly, my name isn't Janet Erskine.'

'Annie a place!' Adam smiled. 'Ye'll never mak' a servant oot o' oor Annie. Naebody wad tak' her. She's ower like a leddy. An' if she did gang, she wadna bide a week. Na, na. If ye speak aboot sendin' Annie awa', I'll gang too. I'll maybe seek a place in the lichtship. So, if Annie gangs, I'll gang. Ye'll ken if ye wad like the hoose without baith the bairns.'

Adam spoke pleasantly, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness and determination in his voice which told that he was not jesting altogether.

'You on the lightship! You wou'd stop about as long as Annie would at service. Adam Erskine, I wish I hadn't taken in the bairn at the wreck. Little did I think I was nursing her to my own vexation.'

'Oh, dinna speak sic nonsense. It's no' that long sin' I heard ye tellin' the minister's wife Annie was mair guid to ye than seevin servants. It's a' my blame. I could bite my tongue oot when I think o't. If only I had held my peace. I'll no' gang till my bed or ye promise no' to mak' ony difference to Annie. She's as guid as ever she was.'

'I can't put her before my own,' said Janet Erskine dourly, quite forgetting that in their childhood she had cherished the orphan waif with an almost selfish tenderness, which had sometimes made her own little boy feel out in the cold. Annie had done her part; she had for a time filled an aching void in Janet Erskine's heart, which time had now healed. Annie was an alien now, and as such Janet Erskine judged her actions. All her life Janet Erskine's will had been law to those about her; Adam, her husband, being gentle, pliable, and willing to be managed, perhaps it was not wonderful that she took so badly with any contradiction now. Annie had always been obedient to her adopted mother, and had only rebelled

when Janet Erskine claimed the right to map out her life for her. All the girl's faithful, willing service, which, though often distasteful, had been performed without a murmur, because she had a loving, grateful heart, was forgotten by Janet Erskine now. She was a narrow-minded woman. Once prejudiced, her heart was as hard as the nether mill-stone. Adam loved his mother with a dutiful and filial love, but he was not blind to her injustice towards Annie; nay, he censured it with all his heart and soul.

He rose to his feet with an impatient gesture. His mother saw it, and saw, too, the dissatisfied look on his face. Her own darkened a little, and she shut her lips together with a sudden pressure. She, too, was set aside for Annie, whose least whim was more binding in the eyes of Adam than her expressed desire! Janet Erskine slept little that night. Her Highland pride was up in arms; her anger, slow to rouse, burned against Annie with a slow but steady fire. It was very causeless, but who can reason with a prejudiced, jealous woman? And Annie? She, too, slept but little, and in her bosom a tumult raged. She had overheard the greater part of the conversation, a fact which Janet Erskine knew very well. Perhaps on that account she had made her remarks in a louder tone than was necessary to reach Adam's ears alone. In the silent night watches Annie brooded over the injustice done to her, and tried to make some plans of action for the future, but her heart was too sore. She felt herself cast out of the heart of the woman she had been taught to love as a mother. That to a girl of Annie Erskine's warm, impulsive, affectionate temperament could only mean a bitter grief. Uppermost in her mind through all that dreary night there was a feeling of deep gratitude to Adam, who had so nobly defended her, and advocated her cause, even while his heart was yet sore over her abrupt answer to his wooing. Ay, Adam Erskine was nothing if not generous and true.

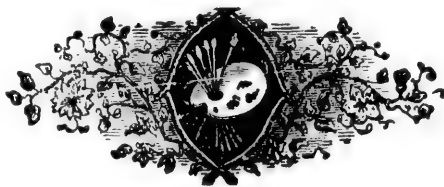
Very early in the morning, before the sunrise, Annie rose,

and, dressing hastily, slipped out of the house. She felt pent-up in her narrow bed; her heart was bursting with the new weight of care laid upon it. She must be out of doors, near the sea, to seek in the tossing, murmuring waves that sympathy and companionship they had never yet denied her. The cottage door was only on the latch, and she slipped out so noiselessly that even Janet, who had only fallen into a fitful dose, was not disturbed. The morning air, fresh, sweet, and keen, kissed Annie's hot cheek as she met it at the door. Involuntarily she drew a long, deep breath. It was as if she breathed the fresh, free air of heaven after being shut in some gloomy dungeon. The Haven was asleep; not a sign of life visible, nor even one faint curl of blue smoke ascending to the sky. But the birds were up, and far away in the vast expanse of sky a lark was trilling its sweet song, its greeting to the new day. The tide was nearly full, and the swelling waters lapping the keels of the boats in the harbour made a low and soothing melody which fell like a benison of peace on Annie Erskine's heart. She turned towards St. Abb's; a curious feeling made her shrink from the way she had walked a few hours before, and where, as it seemed to her, she had met a crisis in her life. The tide being full, the sands were forbidden, so she sped along the road by the sea-wall, past the schoolhouse, and through the stile into the path leading up the braes. The dew was wet on the grass, and the sleepy gowans had tear drops yet in their yellow eyes, waiting to be kissed away by the sun. There was an exquisite stillness in the air, a hush as if Nature held her breath in awe before the approach of the sun's majesty. There was a promise of the sunrise already in the blush slowly spreading over the eastern horizon, and reflected on the shining sea. All these things of beauty Annie Erskine noted with keen and loving eye; they had always been joys to her; they were comforts in this hour of sadness and perplexity concerning her future. She mounted the upland path with hurried feet; she wanted to see the

sunrise from the edge of the cliff, and she knew she had only a few minutes to spare. How still it was! How solemn that exquisite light on the calm sea; what a rebuke to the hurrying strife and unrest in the lives of men! Some such thought touched Annie Erskine's heart as she paused, a little out of breath, at the top of the bent, and the majestic beauty of the scene was revealed to her. A curious feeling of nearness to the Infinite and Divine stole into her heart, and she felt at peace. I do not doubt but that God often speaks to His children through His own creations, sometimes with the voice of warning, but oftener with the voice of mercy and love. Annie Erskine was only an undisciplined, wayward girl, who had never given many serious thoughts to life. She had been content to work in working hours, and dream when dreams were sweet, but something of the reality of life and its discipline was being shown to her. By widely diverging paths, in a thousand various ways, we all learn the same lesson. Experience is a many-voiced teacher, who, as we walk the way of life, is continually at our side. Only with some she is more lavish of her smiles, to others her school is a vale of tears. Annie Erskine leaned against a friendly boulder, and allowed her eyes to wander at will across the sea. There were white sails here and there upon it, fluttering like birds on the surface, but nothing to disturb its ineffable peace. The calm of a summer morning dwelt upon its breast, whose silvery hue was gradually deepening into gold. The sun was yet hid under a great bank of billowy clouds, which, however, were rapidly dispersed, leaving the horizon a glorious blending of crimson, grey, and gold. Then in a moment of splendour the golden radiance streamed down on sea and shore, the ripples flashed gloriously in the sun, the daisies opened yet wider their sleeping eyes, the dew-drops sparkled like diamonds on every blade of grass. The sweet sunbeams kissed the girl's fair cheek, and wooed a smile to her grave lips. It was impossible to resist the benign influence. It seemed to Annie

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as if all her troubles of the night had melted away. Her spirits rose once more. Ah, the youthful spirit is a buoyant and beautiful thing which can never be long repressed. When she turned her eyes towards the Haven again, she saw some figures stirring on the pier; the fishers were up and about their morning work. Shading her eyes she could see that the door of her home was open, and presently she saw the skipper come out and turn down to the harbour. Her heart warmed to him, and her tears started strangely as she noted his stooping figure and grey hair. He loved her, she knew, and nothing in the wide world would ever change that love. She was his 'ain bairn,' 'his lammie,' and a hundred other endearing names which she treasured in her heart. A sudden desire to see him before he went took possession of her, and turning about she began to speed back to the village. But she was a mile and more from the harbour, and she had no idea how long she had been standing dreaming on the beach. Just as she reached the stile, the whole fleet sailed slowly and beautifully out of the cove, with the *Janet Rae* at its head.






CHAPTER VIII.

TWO WOMEN.

ANNIE waited at the stile, and watched the boats until they were nearly a mile from shore. She had no desire to go back to the house. The two who loved her were on the tossing sea; to the solitary woman in the cottage she was an eyesore and a vexation. It was not a pleasant thought, and as Annie began to move down the road a cloud gathered in her sweet eyes, and her lips drooped pitifully, telling of a sore, sore heart. How was she to meet Janet Erskine this morning, how perform her daily round of duty with the memory of last night fresh in her mind? How were the days to be put in until the *Janet Rae* should come back, and the skipper's benign influence should be once more felt in his own home? These questions were still unanswered when Annie reached the cottage door. It was open, but when she went in the kitchen was empty. It was all tidied up, the hearth cleanly white-washed, the bed made, and not a dirty cup or plate to be seen. The breakfast was over evidently. Looking at the clock, Annie saw that it was half-past seven. She had wasted more than two hours out-of-doors. The bed was even made in her own closet, and when she pushed open the room door there was Janet busily dusting the china ornaments on the mantelshelf.

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'I'm sorry I've stayed out so long, mother,' Annie said, quite humbly. 'I sat by the stile and watched the boats go out. You should have left me my work to do.'

'I didn't know when you might come in,' said Janet Erskine, without turning her head. 'If you want anything to eat, you can boil the kettle with a bit stick. I couldn't keep the breakfast dishes lying till dinner time for you.'

Annie turned on her heel and went back to the kitchen with quivering lip. Her heart was bursting with a curious mingling of indignation and grief, and she dared not trust herself to speak. She went away out by the back door, and, sitting down on her stool, began to mend an old net which Adam had declared would never be made to hold together. She could not be idle, and her thoughts kept time for an hour or more with her busy fingers. Janet saw her out of the back window, and her heart was sore for her. She even went into the kitchen and set on the kettle to make her a cup of tea. There was a curious conflict raging in the minds of these two women, though outwardly both were perfectly calm. Annie's pride had risen a little, for she was unconscious of having done any wrong. She said to herself, with a little hard pressure of her pretty lips, that she would not willingly speak to Janet Erskine again, unless she addressed a kind word to her. So the forenoon wore away. Janet Erskine sat knitting at the fireside, and only rose to refill the kettle when it had boiled dry; but there never was a sign nor a sound from the girl working in the sun. There was a painful stillness in the house; it became intolerable at length to Janet Erskine, who rose and went out to the back door. And there was Annie, curled up on the nets, with the sun beating down on her yellow hair and her flushed face. There were tears on her eyelashes, and in her sleep her lips twitched sometimes, as if the memory of her grief haunted her. A great wave of yearning love swept over the heart of Janet Erskine, and she hurried into the house with her eyes full of

tears. Oh, she did love the bairn. If only she would be good and dutiful, how happy they might all be, and what a bright future they might anticipate. With hot haste she made the kettle boil again, and made the tea, and set out a dainty little breakfast for Annie, with buttered toast, and a morsel of nicely browned fish such as the girl loved. When it was all ready she stole softly out again, and, gently touching Annie's shoulder, called to her to rouse up. Annie awoke with a great start, and sprang up with a look of terror.

'Where am I? Oh yes, I forgot; I fell asleep. I was very tired, mother, but I'll try to keep awake now,' she said nervously.

'Hush, Annie, you are worn out. Fling these things down. What's the use of wasting time over that old thing? Come in, and get some breakfast. You are a foolish, wilful lassie, and deserve a good scolding.'

At these kind words Annie's eyes filled again, but an exquisite smile crept to her trembling lips. She was easily touched; a harsh word stabbed her to the heart, but the least touch of kindness filled her heart with sunshine. Ay, the child needed very gentle dealing; her keen, highly-strung, sensitive nature could only be to her a heritage of pain.

She followed her mother obediently into the kitchen, and, sitting down, did ample justice to the tempting meal. But she did not speak, nor did Janet, but knitted on at the blue jersey as if for dear life.

'If you are done, Annie, put by the things and sit down here, and we'll have a talk. There are some things we had better redd up as long as father and Adam's away.'

'Very well, mother,' said Annie quietly, but her hand trembled a little as she gathered up the dishes and set them aside. She put back the table in the window, and, sitting down on the end of the fender, began to play nervously with the hem of her apron.

'You werena sleepin' last night, Annie, when Adam and

me were speaking in here?' began Janet Erskine, without lifting her eyes from her knitting.

'No, I wasn't sleeping.'

'Then you would hear some of what we were saying?'

'I heard every word,' said Annie, and her voice shook. 'It was like to kill me lying there hearing it all.'

'I know you could hear, and I thought it as well you should. Now, Annie, tell me what for you canna marry my son Adam?'

She laid down her knitting at this, and fixed her large keen eyes with calm inquiry on Annie's face.

'Adam told you, mother. I heard him quite plainly. He was quite right. How can I marry my brother?'

'But he is not your brother. He is no more to you than any other man, and I'm sure he is a thousand times better than any one in the Haven or out of it that you know.'

'Yes; I know he is.'

'Then what's the use of going on with all this nonsense, Annie Erskine? Can't you behave like a sensible woman? You are one-and-twenty now, and should have some sense.'

'Sense has nothing to do with this, mother,' said Annie, in a low voice, but with firmness. 'Although I think Adam the best man in the world, next to father, that makes no difference. I could never marry him.'

'Why not?'

'I can't explain, only I know it is true,' was all that Annie said.

'Listen to me, Annie Erskine. I doubt you have gotten a lot of silly notions into your head which will do you a lot of harm. You have a bonnie face, and may be you know it too well. I'm an older woman than you, and I can give you a good advice. Unless you have grace with your beauty, you'll come to grief. You mind what I say.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Annie bluntly, and with wide open eyes.

'You don't want to know, I doubt,' said Janet Erskine, with dry asperity. 'There are snares and pitfalls everywhere for a young girl, especially if she has a face out of the common. I'm telling you plainly, Annie, because I want you to be well warned. You'll never be safe till you get a good man to look after you.'

'Why?'

Annie Erskine's eyes were opened wide in wonderment which was almost childish. She was only a child in many things. She was very innocent. She had been sheltered in that safe home with an encompassing care. No impure word or jest had ever fallen on her ears, she had not the remotest idea of the sin and wickedness which abound in the world, nay, which existed in the very village where she had her home. The skipper's home was as sacred and as pure as any sanctuary, and Annie had grown up in it, a white dove, whose wings had never been soiled even with the dust of the busy world. She was thus totally unfitted to go forth into the world, to encounter its temptation and its troublous care. Perhaps Janet Erskine knew that only too well.

'You aggravate me, Annie,' she said quickly. 'Just let me ask you another question. What is to become of you if you don't marry Adam?'

'I don't know. I can work for myself somewhere. I think God would not have saved me from the wreck if He had not meant me to have a corner somewhere to fill.'

'Ay, but if we neglect the opportunities God's providence sets before us, what then? Heaven only helps those who help themselves. How do you know that God does not intend you to become Mrs. Adam Erskine?'

'Because if He did, I should feel different about it,' said Annie confidently.

Ah, I don't know that. I've had to do a good many things in my time which I didn't like, and wouldn't have done hadn't thought it was my duty plainly set for me to do.'

'Oh, some things one can make one's self do, but marriage is different. You married the man you loved.'

'Well, I did love him, but there was another, Annie, and I'm telling you this for your guiding. There was another I liked better when I was a foolish young girl like you. But he was a ne'er-do-well, who would just have been a heartbreak to me, and when my father bade me send him about his business I did it, because my father was a God-fearing man, who knew what was best for me. And after a bit I married Adam Erskine, and have I ever rued it, Annie? Look how well off I am to-day.'

'Yes, but you hadn't been brought up with him like a brother. It is quite different with me.'

'Well, but that would wear away. You met the Laird last night, I know, Annie. I hope, my lass, that you are not setting your heart on them that's above you. That's never anything but a trouble and a grief.'

It was scarcely fair to speak so abruptly, and it was no wonder that the rich crimson swept up over Annie's neck and cheek and brow.

'Take heed what I say,' continued Janet Erskine, keeping her eyes on her knitting, though she saw the burning blush on the girl's cheek. 'If it's for the young Laird you won't look at Adam, Annie, you'll rue the day. What do you think there could ever be between *you*, a fisher lass, and Sir Archie's son?'

'Nothing. How dare you speak to me like that? I will not listen. It is not kind nor right. You make me think of things I know nothing about. Oh, it is cruel, cruel!'

She sprang up, her chest heaving, her eyes flashing, her small hand clenched in righteous wrath. It was not right, and for a moment Janet Erskine quailed before the young girl, whose womanly pride and indignation she had effectually roused. She looked like a queen in her anger. Even in that instant of discomfort Janet Erskine was struck by her exceeding beauty.

'Sit down, Annie, and don't be foolish,' she said coldly. 'I am speaking to you for your good, and I *will* speak, whether you like it or not, because it is my duty. You know nothing about the ways of young men, especially young gentlemen like Mr. Archie. They think they have a right to talk nonsense to any pretty girl if she is in a different position from them; and, if you believe all they say to you, you'll have your head full enough of lies and foolishness.'

The colour slowly died out of the girl's face, but left a bright scarlet spot burning on either cheek. She walked away over to the window, and stood looking out on the little bay, whose sun-kissed waves were breaking with a gentle cadence on the shore. Oh, there was peace there on the shining sea; a great longing to hide her new sorrows beneath it swept across the girl's throbbing heart. Life was very hard, and human beings cruel.

Dumb things could not hurt, nay, they could comfort in a silent, mysterious fashion without leaving any sting behind.

Still Janet Erskine's monotonous voice continued to sound through the stillness. It was as if she had set herself a task of so many sentences, which must be uttered at any cost.

'To come back, then, to the question, what is to become of you when father and I are dead? Though Adam is your brother, as you say, you could not live together without us.'

'Perhaps I shall die first—I hope so,' fell from the girl's lips, more to herself than to her listener.

'That's a sinful thing to say; but it's not likely you'll die first, and it is right to provide for the future. What do you think you'll do? Don't you think you'll be much better and happier with a good husband like Adam than you would be any other way? There'll be a lot o' gear, and Adam would aye be bringing in. He's not a spender. And about the gear, we can hardly put it past our own that has been such a good son to us.'

'Do *I* want your gear?' quoth Annie hotly, roused again.

'Why do you say such hard things to me? I will not wait another day to be a burden on you. I daresay I can get a place, as you spoke of last night.'

Janet Erskine took alarm. She knew her husband's worship of Annie, and if he were to come home to find her gone, with what words should she answer his questioning?

'Come here, Annie.'

Annie turned round but slowly. Her will rebelled, but the habit of obedience was strong upon her.

'We'll never redd this up, I fear; and I see there's no hope for Adam,' she said, trying to speak kindly, though her heart was again as cold as ice towards the girl. 'I'd have to think no more about it, and we'll just slip into the old way again. So don't look so glum. Will you try, Annie? I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, my dear. I was trying to speak for your good. If I didn't love you, do you think I'd wish my son Adam to take you to wife? Isn't he the very apple of my eye? Let me see you smile again, Annie, and we'll let bygones be bygones.'

A wan, wintry smile did dawn on the girl's lips, and she tried to nod her head. Janet Erskine's stolid nature might find it easy to slip into the old way, and forget the swift current which now ruffled it, but Annie's never again. There was a shadow on her heart which not an Erskine among them would ever lift away.

She went away out to the garden where the sunshine lay drowsily over everything, but her eyes saw it not. As she stood in the doorway, Ethel Grant's big dog came very leisurely round the end of the house. Missing his accustomed welcome, he came close to the girl, and rubbed his head against her gown, looking up into her face with eyes which were almost human. Down on her knees went Annie Erskine, and clasped her arms round the animal's neck.

'Oh, Major, Major, if I only could be a little girl again!' she sobbed. 'It is so hard to grow up.'



CHAPTER IX.

ANNIE AT ST. VEDA'S.

THAT'S a message from the Castle, Annie; it is for you, and the man is to wait an answer,' said Janet Erskine, when she came out to the back door with a letter in her hand. Annie took it rather listlessly, and tore it open. It was in Ethel's writing, and sealed with her pretty seal on the back:—'Dear Annie,' it began, 'Papa and Archie are away, and mamma and I are to be all alone this afternoon and evening. Do come up. I have a little hoarseness, and mamma will not let me out.—Yours, **ETHEL GRANT.**'

'Tell Phillips to tell Miss Ethel I'll come by and by, mother,' she said. 'I suppose there is nothing for me to do to-day.'

'There is not much,' answered Janet Erskine slowly. 'But what's the use of running aye to the Castle, Annie? It won't do you any good, nor make you any more contented with our plain way of doing.'

'It won't make any difference, mother, and if Miss Ethel wants me I must go, for she has been a kind dear friend to me,' said Annie quietly. 'If it is the young Laird you are afraid of he is away, as you can read for yourself in Miss Ethel's letter.'

Annie did not hurry herself. But she did all the work she

could find lying to her hand, and then changed her dress and made her hair straight. She always wore blue serge, and, though her gowns were not made by a fashionable *modiste*, she wore them with a grace which gave them a style quite her own. Her hat was a round blue sailor straw, with a plain band. Thus attired Annie Erskine looked as much a lady as Miss Grant of St. Veda's. Major had elected to remain at the cottage until Annie was ready, and watched all her movements with the most intelligent interest.

'I'm all ready, mother; I'll not be late,' she said, looking into the kitchen when she was ready. 'Now, Major, you most patient of all doggies, come away!'

Annie went out by the back door, gathered a handful of pink sea-daisies, and put them in at her throat, and went off singing to the shore. Her spirits rose with the sunshine, and the fresh wind blowing in from the sea seemed to dispel for a little the clouds which had been gathering round her life. Annie Erskine liked going to the Castle. She felt at home in the lofty rooms, the elegance and beauty and luxury were all pleasant to her. Often she wished she had been born a lady like Ethel Grant, the life at the Castle was so much more congenial to her than life at the cottage. How fair the grey old Castle, with its ivied turrets, looked in the mellow haze of the summer afternoon! Annie had often admired it, but to-day, as she came up the steep little path which led from the stairs in the cliff, and saw the old place in all its beauty, her heart was filled with a vague feeling of envy and strange yearning pain. What a place to live and die in was that weather-beaten heritage with the histories of ages written on its hoary battlements, and the loves and hopes of generations hidden in every clinging touch of the green ivy on its walls! Why was so much given to some in this world, so little to others? Such was the question Annie Erskine put to herself as she looked upon St. Veda's that summer day. Poor, riven, undisciplined young heart! You are not the first who has

faced in bitterness the problems of life, forgetful awhile of the Omniscient who doeth all things well. Annie Erskine never went to the kitchen door at the Castle, and thereby gave great and serious offence to the servants. She never went at all except by special invitation, and then she presented herself at the front entrance like any ordinary guest. She could not endure the servants at the Castle, their patronising familiarity made her indignant. The footmen had not been slow at first to pay their compliments to the pretty fisher girl, but they had never attempted it a second time. Annie Erskine took no more notice of them than if they had never spoken at all. And after that time she never recognised the men-servants of St. Veda's. She could be very haughty when she liked, and she had effectually snubbed all her admirers. She did not know why she should feel so, only she knew that their looks made her heart swell with indignation. It was not that she thought herself better than they were. She only desired to be left alone. The lads of Orr's Haven had long since learned that the skipper's lass was of different stuff from the other women folk in the Haven. The men servants at St. Veda's had been obliged to learn the same lesson, but it had been a more difficult task for them, they being puffed up with their own conceit. Annie Erskine then was hated with a mortal hatred in the servants' hall at St. Veda's. The maids tossed their heads when they spoke of her, and predicted that she would come to no good. It was as bitter as gall to them to see her at home in the drawing-room or my lady's boudoir, and to be obliged to wait on her there as if she was a lady born. If ill-will could have poisoned the cup, Annie Erskine would not have enjoyed her afternoon tea at St. Veda's. But she was quite unconscious of the animosity she excited. She imagined they were all as indifferent to her as she was to them.

Lady Grant's servants were all English, except the kitchen-maid, who was an Eyemouth girl. They were smart young

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women, of course, much given to gay ribbons and lace-trimmed caps and aprons. One of them came across the hall, in answer to Annie Erskine's ring that afternoon, and pertly inquired her business. Her manner was rude 'n the extreme ; even Annie, in spite of her abstraction, noticed it. But Miss Bella had been too quick, for Ethel Grant was in the gun-room when the bell rang, and the door, being a little ajar, she heard the housemaid's words, and came into the hall just as Annie slipped into it.

'I think you have forgotten your place, Isabella,' she said, with a sharpness she did not often exhibit. 'Please to remember in future, that to be rude to my friend is to be rude to me, and will have the same consequences. Annie, I am so glad to see you.'

She grasped the girl's hands in both her own and kissed her before the eyes of Isabella, who departed to the kitchen in a crestfallen state, but burning with new indignation against Annie Erskine.

'I hope the maids don't often speak to you like that,' said Ethel Grant anxiously, as she linked her arm in Annie's and led her upstairs.

'It doesn't matter, Miss Ethel. Never mind about it at all,' answered Annie ; but her cheek was red still, and Ethel saw that the girl's impertinence had hurt her. Oh, these fine feelings of Annie Erskine's could never bring her anything but pain. Many a time she had wished her nature were less keen, that she could be indifferent as were the others about her. Womanhood had as yet brought but little joy to Adam Erskine's adopted child.

'Papa is in London, Annie. Is it not tiresome? It is so dull at St. Veda's when he is away,' said Ethel, wisely changing the subject, though resolving to inquire further into it ; 'and Archie has ridden over to Houndswood to ask for Colonel Dalrymple. Did you hear that he was thrown off his horse yesterday? If he is not seriously injured, Archie will

not be home till late, so mamma and I are all alone. I thought there would not be very much to do at the cottage to-day.'

'No, there isn't much. I could come quite well. I hope you did not get your sore throat sitting in the garden with me yesterday, Miss Ethel?'

'Oh no, I was wakeful in the night, and got up to see the moon without putting on my dressing-gown; but don't tell mamma. It is so tiresome when one feels well to have to remember one has to be so terribly careful. I suppose, now, you wouldn't be cold though you were to walk on the sands without a dressing-gown. Here is Annie, mamma. Isn't she prettier than ever?'

Lady Grant smiled, and extended her hand in kindly welcome to the skipper's lass.

'Ethel's tongue runs too fast; doesn't it, Annie? Sit down, my dear; I am very glad to see you. But you should have taken her to your room to put off her hat, Ethel.'

'Oh, she'll throw it on the floor; won't you, Annie? Do you know you look lovely in that frock and hat, and yet there is nothing particularly attractive in the garments themselves; is there, mamma?'

'Nothing particular. Annie has grace and style of her own. But we must not say so many personal things, or Annie will be frightened away. Did the boats sail away this morning, dear?'

'Yes; just after sunrise. I was up at St. Abb's, and saw them. May I sit at this window, Lady Grant? The sea is so fine from this window.'

'Surely; sit anywhere you like, my dear. There is a delightful basket chair; it just fits into the corner.'

Annie carried over the chair, but she did not sit down. She felt very curious. The warm, richly perfumed room, with its soft carpets and luxurious appointments oppressed her. She wanted light, air, freedom; her heart seemed pent in her bosom. She could not understand herself. She had

so often enjoyed these very luxuries which seemed to hurt her to day. Lady Grant was watching her keenly. She felt more interested in her than ever. She was struck anew by the girl's native beauty and grace. There was nothing common about her. In her coarse serge frock she looked as much a lady as Ethel in her elegant tea-gown. Lady Grant began to weave a romance about the girl's slender figure and bright head, not dreaming that her real life story was a romance ten times more thrilling, and one which was yet destined to touch very closely the honour and happiness of St. Veda's.

Ethel chattered away as she played little snatches on the piano, and it was scarcely noticed how very silent Annie Erskine was. She stood still in the window, looking out upon the blue expanse of sea, with the picturesque, low-lying coast of Fife on the opposite side. It was a lovely picture. Its beauty sank into the girl's heart, and soothed it as nothing else could have done.

'What a lot of boats are out to-day!' she said presently. 'Aren't those sails just like wings? How bonnie they look!'

'Oh yes, they are lovely. I must show you something I have for you, Annie, if you are a good girl. I did it at grandmamma's mostly from memory, though I had an outline. Didn't I put it in the portfolio, mamma?'

'I think so; but you are not tidy, Ethel,' said Lady Grant.

'Let me help you to look for it, Miss Ethel,' said Annie, springing to her side.

'Oh, never mind, here it is. Now, isn't that so like the Haven, Annie? There is your own house, and of course that is you at the door.'

'Oh, how nice! How can you do it, Miss Ethel? It is all so life like,' exclaimed Annie as she held the sketch at arm's length and feasted her eyes on it. It was a water-colour exquisitely painted. Ethel had sketched it from on board the *Spitfire* out in the bay one day the previous

summer, and had finished it at St. Malo. It was a view of the Haven from the sea, and was a perfect picture; the feeling of the warm sunlight on the red roofs and the yellow sands was beautifully produced. Annie gazed at it in wonder.

'And is this for me, Miss Ethel, for my own self to keep?'

'Yes, of course, and if you leave it with me I shall have it framed in Edinburgh for you when we go next week. Oh, don't look at that. It was meant for Archie, but is far too handsome for him; though, of course, he said it was a caricature. Do you think it like?'

'Very like,' said Annie briefly, but quickly turned it to the other side.

'Well, shall I keep it for the frame?'

'Not just now, Miss Ethel, if you don't mind. You see I have not a room of my own to hang it in, and I could keep it in my box as it is.'

'Oh, very well. When you set up housekeeping, Annie, we can easily get it framed. Ah, here comes tea. Isn't it almost too hot for tea? Are there any strawberries in the house, Isabella?'

'None picked, Miss Ethel,' returned Isabella rather sullenly, and with a glance at Annie Erskine, who at the maid's entrance had returned to the window, and turned her back to the tea-table.

'Oh, well, never mind. You can go, Isabella. We shall wait on ourselves, thank you. Come, Annie, and cut this tempting cake.'

They lingered over the tea-table talking merrily, and Annie seemed quite herself again.

'Now, you chatterboxes, you can go into another room till I write my letter. There is no peace where you are,' said Lady Grant, by and by.

'Let us go up to the tower. Eh, Annie? I was up half the morning. You can almost see people walking on the road at the East Neuk, it is so clear.'

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'Oh, I must show you my new portrait. It has come down from London. A very famous artist painted it, and papa is highly pleased with it. He hung it himself in the gallery this morning.'

The picture gallery at St. Veda's was not large, and almost every available inch of space was covered with family portraits.

'Papa had to take one down to make room for mine, but he must find another place, he says, because I am not hanging where I ought to be. You see there is no room beside papa and mamma. So he says there must be an entire re-arrangement of the pictures. What an earthquake that will be! won't it? Well, how do you like me? Doesn't Major look splendid? Did you ever see anything so lovely as his head?'

'Your face is so lovely I can't look at anything else. You are like an angel.'

'That's what papa says. It is the white frock, I suppose. It is because you all love me you think me nice; isn't it, Annie? Do you know, Annie, papa had tears in his eyes when he saw it, and I heard him say to mamma, "It is too fragile-looking; she looks too ethereal for this world."'

'That's what I think; but it is very, very like you. When you are tired you look exactly like that.'

'Do I? I sometimes feel pretty fragile, Annie. I suppose I shall not live to be very old. I think papa knows I may not be very long with him, and that was why he wanted this. He did not speak of having Archie done. Sometimes I have a great desire to live; but other times when I am so weak as I was at grandmamma's this spring, I think I would not mind. And life has always some trouble in it. If one dies young, that is spared.'

'You mustn't die, Miss Ethel. We couldn't do without you,' said Annie Erskine quickly and passionately. 'There are others whose lives are not so precious. You must stay.'

Ethel Grant smiled slightly, and shook her head. The shadow of an early death had lain so long on her heart, that it had ceased to have any dread. It is a beautiful thing in life that familiarity with its shadows can rob them of their darkness. Ay, we are cared for, indeed, by an all-wise and all-loving God.

'What do you think of this portrait now that is down?' asked Ethel, turning to the light the canvas which stood on the floor.

'It is beautiful, I think. The mouth is so sweet and kind,' said Annie quickly, looking with deep interest at the portrait. 'Who is it?'

'That is poor Uncle Archie,' responded Ethel Grant with a sigh. 'He was papa's elder brother, you know, and ought to have been Sir Archie. Did you ever hear the story?'

'No, Miss Ethel, never.'

'He was at College in Edinburgh, and while there made a foolish marriage. We don't know who his wife was, but she was quite poor, and grandfather was terribly angry. He was a very proud man. Papa is not in the least like him in that respect; and he said he would never forgive him. You see Uncle Archie was so young, only three-and-twenty; it was very foolish. Of course grandfather could not disinherit him, St. Veda's being entailed, and the title in direct descent, but he forbade him the house, and said he would never live under the same roof with him again. It killed grandmother. She was like me, not strong. Uncle Archie went away to India with his girl wife, and nothing more was heard of him. When grandfather died every inquiry was made, but no clue was ever found; so, of course, papa entered into possession. I have heard him say that at first he only held the place in trust for his brother; but, of course, as years went by, and there were no tidings of him, he began to regard himself as the only master of St. Veda's. It was a terrible grief to papa. I suppose the two brothers loved each other like David and

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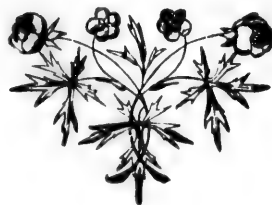
Jonathan. Even yet he can scarcely speak about Uncle Archie.'

'But how were both called by the same name?' asked Annie Erskine with intense interest.

'Oh, they weren't. Papa's own name is John. But he had to take the name of Archibald. You see it has always been Sir Archie. Isn't it a sad story, Annie? I often wonder what became of the poor young wife, if she was left a widow in India alone.'

'Yes, it is a sad story,' said Annie Erskine with a slight shiver, and bending down she looked long and earnestly at the beautiful face on the canvas. The mobile, sweet-tempered mouth was laughingly curved. There was a smile in Archibald Grant's sunny eyes which had nothing in common with the story of his life.

Annie Erskine looked long at the picture, and carried it away from St. Veda's photographed on her heart.





CHAPTER X.

TRIED.

SO there is to be no marriage in the Haven this year, Ethel tells me,' said Lady Grant, in her gentle fashion, finding herself alone with Annie Erskine, after the girls returned from their ramble through the Castle.

'There will be some marriages likely, Lady Grant, but I don't know how many,' returned Annie; but her colour rose, for she knew quite well that Lady Grant was not alluding to the subject in a general way.

'Ah, you naughty child, nicely you know *that* is not what I mean,' said the lady, with smiling raillery, and keeping her eyes fixed keenly on the girl's sweet face. There was just a touch of gentle patronage in Lady Grant's manner towards the skipper's lass; but that, perhaps, was scarcely to be avoided. There can hardly be an equal friendship in such a case; and yet Ethel's manner was entirely free from the least hint of pride or distance. She had a curious feeling about Annie Erskine; her swift, delicate intuition seemed to tell her that there was something in common between them. Miss Grant, however, was not without a certain hauteur of manner when occasion required, but Annie Erskine had never seen that side of her friend's nature. To her Ethel Grant was invariably sweet, kind, gentle--almost sisterly in her manner. She

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loved Annie Erskine, and her love was intensified by her deep pity for the girl so curiously placed, and so obviously out of tune with her surroundings.

‘It is your marriage I am thinking of, my dear. So you are not to make Adam happy this year?’

‘If you mean that I am not to marry him, Lady Grant, you are quite right. I shall never marry Adam Erskine,’ returned Annie, and Lady Grant saw the small brown hand clench on her knee.

‘Come here, Annie, and sit by me,’ said the gentle lady of St. Veda’s. ‘I love you very much, and I want to talk to you a little about this. It has given me a great deal of thought.’

‘I cannot be talked to any more,’ cried Annie rebelliously, and she rose to her feet as if she could not be still. ‘Mother has talked to me all morning. I have had my duty well pointed out to me, Lady Grant, and I have refused to do it. If everybody turns against me for it, then I must just go away from the Haven. It will be easier than living in it as I am just now.’

‘My poor dear girl, I am not going to point out your duty to you,’ said Lady Grant, in her kindest tones. ‘If we attend to our own duty in this world, Annie, we generally find that we have not much time to teach duty to others. Our lesson and our advice to our fellows can be given in actions more than in words. I can see that you are very unhappy, that your heart is hot and restless. I would be your true friend if I could. Won’t you tell me something of what is passing in your mind?’

Annie was conquered. With a quick, sudden gesture she turned, and kneeling by Lady Grant’s sofa, buried her face in the soft wraps, trembling from head to foot. She was not weeping; Annie Erskine’s tears did not readily flow. She could bear a great deal in silence, but her heart knew its own bitterness and pain.

For a little Lady Grant did not speak, but passed her hand

gently to and fro on the girl's fevered head with a touch infinitely caressing.

'I am very unhappy,' said Annie, in a low trembling voice, at length. 'Dear Lady Grant, I cannot stay any longer here. Mother has ceased to love me because I cannot do as she would like.'

'But Adam'—

'Oh, Adam is all that is good and true and generous. If he were not so good it would be easier for me. There will never be a better man than my brother, Adam Erskine,' said Annie, with emphasis on the words in which she acknowledged the only tie she would ever recognise between Adam and herself.

'But if you go away, Annie, what will Captain Erskine say? He could not live without you. You know how much you are to him.'

'Oh, I know; and I love him so that I would die for him. I don't know what to do! They have bound me with cords which it will break my heart to cut; and yet I must. How can I live on, estranged from mother as I am? She is hard and cold to me. I heard her say myself to Adam, that unless I married him, the same house could not hold us now. She cannot leave, so I must.'

'And where would you go?'

'To service somewhere. Mother says that better than I have gone to service, and that it would teach me humility,' said Annie, raising her head, and looking straight before her with a cold, calm gaze. 'That's what I need; something to break my spirit. I have got to think too much of myself. It will do me good, as mother says, to go and knock about the world.'

'My poor Annie, to knock about the world, as you put it, would never do for a young, pretty girl like you. You are at least safe in the Haven.'

'That is how mother talked this morning. I do not understand it. Why should it not be safe for me to go and earn

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my own living? If a friendless woman cannot do that, why is she born at all? There is no provision made for her.'

'Hush! Annie; you are talking wildly,' said Lady Grant, with gentle reproach.

'I am not talking wildly. I am only asking a simple question. Suppose that father and Adam were to be drowned some day, and mother were to die of grief at the shock, and I should be left alone, what would I do? Nobody would keep a great idle girl they had no interest in. If I could not go into the world to work what would become of me?'

'You perplex me, Annie, and you suppose too many improbabilities,' said Lady Grant, rather disconcerted by the girl's vehement and unanswerable questioning. 'Besides, you are not friendless. Do you suppose *we* would take no interest in you?'

Annie Erskine cast an involuntary glance round the luxurious room, then at her own plain frock and brown, toil-hardened hands. It was as if she were measuring some distance between herself and her surroundings.

'Yes, you have always been kind, and if I came here as Miss Ethel's maid, I should serve for love,' she said slowly. 'I could do that. I was wrong when I said I had no friends.'

Lady Grant was silent a moment, more and more perplexed. There were undercurrents in the nature of this girl before her—undercurrents swift, passionate, and strong, which the gentle mistress of St. Veda's felt, but could not fathom. A vague sense of helplessness came over her as she looked at the tall, straight, beautiful girl, with the appearance of a queen, ay, and the pride of a queen in her heart, though she wore the garb of the people. What was to become of her? What could life be for this wild, undisciplined spirit, but a fierce and fiery contest to the very end?

'Sir Archie is away to London, Annie,' she said quietly. 'When he comes back, we are to settle about going for a few weeks to some mild inland place. Ethel's cough is lingering

too long this summer, like the east winds. We are not decided yet whether to go north or south, but you will come with us, Annie. It is necessary, I think, that you should leave the Haven for a little just now to let the household settle down into its old way, and Ethel will only be too glad of your companionship. You will come, Annie?'

'Only too readily, Lady Grant. I am an ungrateful girl, I know; but, oh, I do love *you* for all your kindness,' she said, with a sob in her voice. As she spoke she stooped and touched with her lips the white jewelled hand lying on the fur.

The act was simply done, and yet with a natural grace a queen might have envied. Once more Lady Grant was struck with an indefinable something in the girl's look and manner, which made her speculate anew regarding her identity. Her birthright would not hide. Annie Erskine was a lady born. She had emerged from rough girlhood into a gracious, queenly woman, whose every gesture was instinct with an inborn grace. Who was she? and what could her future be? These questions rushed to Lady Grant's lips and were nearly uttered. But reflecting that they might only unsettle yet more the girl's already restless mind, she wisely held her peace.

'I must get away home, Lady Grant. I promised mother not to be late, and the sun is setting,' said Annie presently, bringing her solemn eyes back from the radiant west. 'If, if you still think of taking me with you, will you come and ask mother about it? I am afraid to tell her anything. She does not understand me as she used. She always thinks I am feeling some bad, bitter thing in my heart, when I am only vexed. Life is not a pleasant thing, I think, except when we are very little, and can play with flowers and pebbles in the sun.'

There was deep pathos in the girl's low, quiet voice. It went to her listener's heart. At that moment Ethel came into the room, with Major at her heels.

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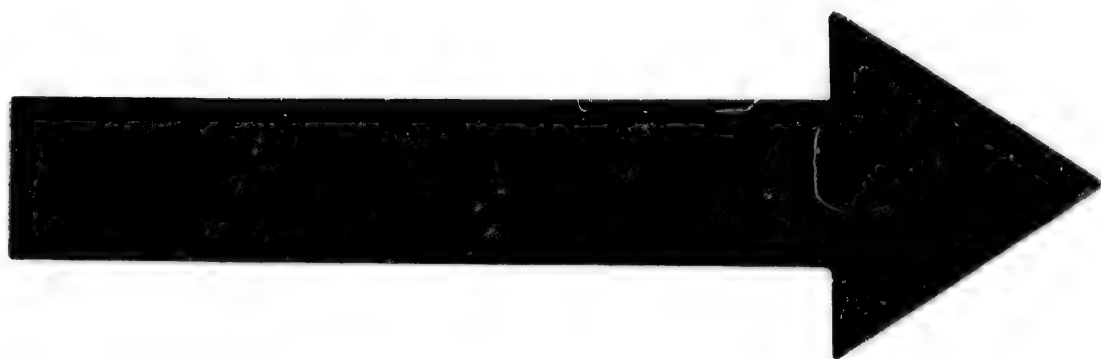
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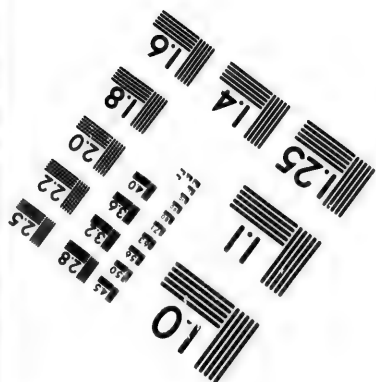
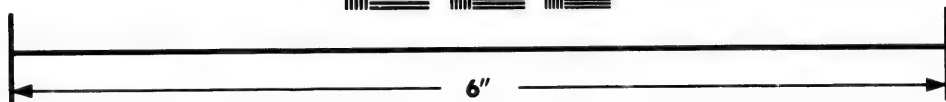
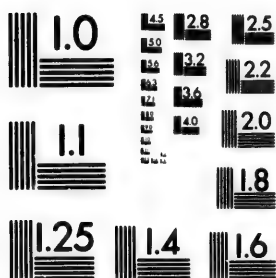
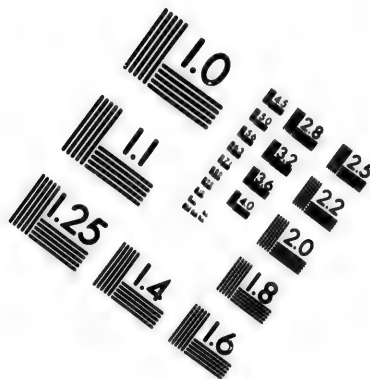
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dine, I suppose. He will be provoked when he finds you have been here all afternoon. How very grave and solemn Annie is! Isn't she, mamma? She looks as if she had all the affairs of the nation weighing on her heart.'

Annie smiled as she bent over Lady Grant's couch and bade her good-bye. Their hands met in a warm, close pressure, and there were tears in the elder woman's eyes when the girl left her. She felt strangely drawn to her; she marvelled at herself.

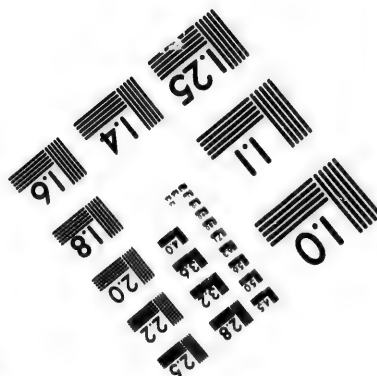
Ethel parted from her on the steps with a kiss and a word of laughing farewell; and Annie walked soberly down the narrow path to the edge of the cliff, and finding that the tide was in, and no footing left at the base of the cliffs, she had to retrace her steps by a circuitous path through the scanty woodland to the lodge gates. Never, if she could help it, did Annie Erskine come up the avenue to St. Veda's. As she passed out by the footpath at the lodge the sharp click of hoofs came sounding through the still evening air. No need for her to turn her head up the road; she knew by the wild beating of her heart who was the rider. She walked quickly past the open gates toward the village; but Archie Grant, recognising the slim, blue-robed figure, gave his horse the rein, and came up with her before she had gone many yards. Of course, there was nothing for Annie but to stand still. She knew very well that if she walked on the young Laird would ride by her side to the very door of the cottage. Little cared he for Haven gossip or Haven looks. Annie Erskine had become the dearest thing on the earth to him, and he thought no shame, but rather pride, to be seen by her side. But that day Annie Erskine had received her first lesson in worldly wisdom; her frank, unsuspecting freedom had been poisoned by Janet Erskine's venomous tongue, and she veiled her eyes when she stood on the road to speak a moment with the Laird. There was no difference in his manner, however; it was eager, frank, impetuous, and his eyes told their unmistakable tale.





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'Why are you away home already? What a shame, Annie, when you knew I would be hurrying to see you, and to walk home with you,' he said, with keen reproach. 'Won't you walk slowly till I take Blindpit to the stable? I could be with you in ten minutes.'

'No, I'll not wait; I'm going home. They are waiting dinner for you at the Castle.'

Her voice was cold as ice, and she did not look at him. Her manner was indifferent, her face utterly unreadable.

'Oh, hang dinners!' he exclaimed, with all the impetuosity of youth and love. 'What do I care for dinner when I can see you? I have such a lot to say to you. Say you'll wait for me, Annie. It's not too much for a fellow to ask when he's been away for two years from his old chum, too! Who's to be kind to him if she won't?'

The girl's lip twitched, and the rose she had in her hand fell to the dusty road in a shower of crushed leaves.

'I'm going home,' she repeated, in the same cold, even tones, maintained by a mighty effort. 'Good evening, Mr. Archie.'

'I must have offended you, Annie. If it was anything I said last night forgive me. I wish I'd never said it, though every word was true, and ten times more if you only knew it. Wait you must, and at the foot of the old stair to-night, when the moon is up, just to talk of old times.'

'No, I won't.'

Her words were ungracious to rudeness. He could not understand them.

'Are you going back on me, Annie?' he asked, with an earnestness which was almost comical, it was so dejected. 'Are the old times to count for nothing after all?'

'I wish you'd go away back to your fine Castle and never speak to me again,' she cried, flashing her magnificent eyes for a moment on his face. Then she fled from him, leaving him standing in perplexity on the road.

He turned Blindpit's head, but at the same time kept his

eye on Annie's movements. It was as he expected. She did not turn round the bend to descend the School Brae, but kept straight along the high path which took her to St. Abb's.

Then Archie Grant leisurely rode Blindpit to the stable, and, without going near the house, retraced his steps, and followed Annie Erskine.

It seemed to Annie Erskine as she hurried along the bluffs in the dusk of that summer evening that too many trying things were heaped upon her. She felt as if she had no strength left to buffet with a new temptation which had arisen fierce and strong in her heart. She walked very rapidly, and, passing by St. Abb's, whose white buildings stood out like ghosts in the wavering evening light, she began to descend the rugged slope to a little creek shut in by yawning rocks on either side, and absolutely screened from view except from the sea. There was a little narrow strip of shingly beach, dotted with big boulders here and there, over which the sea made a wild roaring in stormy weather, but which were like stones of rest on a pleasant evening, inviting the wayfarer to be seated, and ponder for a little on the mystery and beauty of the sea. It was a place almost startling in its absolute solitude, shut in by the high bents on all sides, and giving a peep of the wide-spreading sea, which can hold its secrets like the grave, and tells no tales to fret the weary minds of man. Annie Erskine sat down there on a big rough boulder, so near to the edge that the waves played about her feet. She folded her hands and turned her eyes out upon the waveless sea, asking dumbly, as of yore, for its whisper of comfort and peace. It was bathed in an absolute calm, and had the dim glory of the faded sunset on its breast. For the first time in her life Annie Erskine found that there are human troubles too serious to be comforted by ought but help—human or divine.



CHAPTER XI.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

IT was a critical moment in the lives of these two young people when they met that summer evening beneath the rocky shadow of St. Abb's. Annie was sitting listlessly on the stone, with her fine eyes turned out to sea. She was leaning a little forward, and the tips of her fingers touched the cool, green water as it played round her. She heard the noise of the shingle under Archie Grant's firm foot, but she did not look round. She had a curious feeling at the moment, a strange stillness seemed to envelop her whole being. She felt that she was waiting for something to happen, that a crisis had approached, and she was prepared to meet it. She neither blushed nor showed any sign of embarrassment when she turned her head to look at the young man.

'Come back, Annie! How reckless you are: he cried anxiously. 'You know the treacherous sea as well as I. Some day you will be too late.'

'And what though I should be too late to-night even?' she asked calmly, as she allowed her whole hand to glide to and fro under the water. 'There are worse things than the sea,—ay, and harder things to bear even than its cold waves. Why have you come here after me?'

Her voice suddenly changed after the last sentence, and

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with a little passionate movement, she rose suddenly and stepped across the inlet to the shingle.

'I have no peace among you. Oh, how I wish I had been drowned that night with my mother!'

She gave her foot a passionate stamp, and picking up a pebble tossed it far out to sea. They both watched in silence the eddying circles it made in its downward course.

'Shall I tell you why you were saved, Annie?' asked Archie, with all a lover's eagerness. 'It was because you were destined to bless my life, and the lives of others.'

'Whose life have I blessed?' she asked in mockery. 'I have brought only misery to them at home. It would have been far, far better for them if they had not kept me, and it would have been better for me too.'

'But not for me, Annie, because I love you,' said Archie, with a simple and manly earnestness. She stood very still, leaning against a boulder, and again her eyes sought the shining sea. While they were thus fixed, a curious and beautiful radiance glowed in their depths, and the sweet colour rose exquisitely in her cheek. These, to young love, are signs of hope. Involuntarily the young man took a step nearer to her, and a word of passionate endearment passed his lips.

'Hush! oh, hush!' she said, almost in distress. 'Let me be silent a little, only a little, and then I will speak.' It was not easy for him to obey her, but it was not for long. He stood close beside her, he leaned down till his handsome head nearly touched hers. He was anxious to see her face, which the summer gloaming was hiding from his gaze.

'Annie, I love you,' he repeated. 'I want you for my wife, my darling. I am in earnest. You daren't send me away. Why, nobody could ever be your chum as I have been.'

A light laugh accompanied the last words, for he saw her lips quivering into a smile. But still he could not see her eyes, which would have revealed to him her heart.

'Annie!'

He laid his hand on her shoulder, and slowly drew her closer, closer, until his arms enfolded her. So they stood a moment in deep silence, heart to heart, a moment of happiness more rare than either had ever tasted before. Oh that we could leave them there! Perhaps they will never be so happy again anywhere.

It was Annie who moved first, and she drew herself away with a sudden, hurried gesture, just as if she had been suddenly recalled to a sense of what ought to be.

'Let me go! How dare you?' she cried, and the quick, hot colour flowed, now swift and crimson, through every vein. 'How dare you?'

'I dare because I love you, and because you love me. I know you do, Annie Erskine,' said the young Laird quietly. 'Look me in the face and say you don't, and I'll let you go. You can't do it.'

Alas! no. She turned about from him, and leaning her two arms on the jagged edge of the boulder, hid her face. Love him! Ay, with all her heart and soul—better than life itself.

'Annie, don't go on,' said Archie, with something of the old boyishness. 'It's no sort of use, you know, because you belong to me, and you need not think I am going to let you off, because I am not.'

'What are you going to do, then?' she asked, turning her face to him once more. 'Suppose we do like each other in that way, what then? It must be the beginning and the end.'

'Must it, though?' queried Archie quickly. 'I think differently. The beginning is that I love you, and you love me; the end, or the other beginning, will be that we two shall wed. I've made up my mind where we are to spend the honeymoon, Annie Erskine. We'll go on a yachting cruise in the Mediterranean.'

'In the *Spitfire*?' she asked, with a little humorous smile. Even in that moment of keen, quick feeling she had a jest ready.

'No, thank you; my wife will be too precious to be risked any more in the *Spitfire*; but there'll be a new boat built for the Haven creeks soon, and what do you think it will be called?—the *Bonnie Annie*.'

There was a moment's silence, then Annie Erskine turned her head and raised her large eyes to the man whose face bent upon her in love. There was something very solemn and earnest in that gaze; and the girl's sweet mouth took a pathetic curve when she spoke.

'You know as well as I that such a thing could never, never be. How could a poor fisher girl ever hope to mate with a Grant of St. Veda's? What would your kinsfolk say? They would never, never consent.'

'Oh yes, they would. Look how they love you already. Why, they would be delighted, I am certain.'

'Would they? I know better. They love me in a way, and are kind to me because I am a fisher girl, and because they are sorry for me. But *that* would be different. Do you think your people are freer from pride of birth than others in their station? You know they are not. It would be a terrible blow to them if they thought you were thinking anything about me in that way. They would never forgive you nor me.'

'And if they didn't, what then? I'm my own master, am I not? St. Veda's will be mine. They can't put it past me.'

'Can't they?'

'No, unless they were to break the entail, and I don't think my father would do that; but what is the use of dwelling on imaginary troubles? Suppose they could take St. Veda's from me,—I would give it all up gladly for you, Annie, for nothing would be worth the having without you.'

'Would you give up St. Veda's, even?'

'St. Veda's! the whole world if I had it. I tell you, Annie Erskine, you don't know what you are to me. I hardly

know myself. Why, the very thought that your name should be coupled in that way, even with Adam's, made me nearly mad. I nearly hated him, Annie, good fellow though he is. You daren't marry Adam Erskine.'

'No,' said Annie, in a low, quiet voice. 'Whatever I do, you need never be afraid of that.'

'Then you will allow me to speak, Annie? You will let me tell them how I love you?' he said eagerly.

The girl was silent a moment. She was strongly tempted, and as a vision of what life might be with Archie Grant rose up before her, the light of a great joy dawned on her face. But it was only for a moment. The memory of Lady Grant's patronizing tone recurred to her, and the slightly-veiled impertinence of the servants at St. Veda's returned with a new and bitter sting. Suppose that one day she should be their mistress, and as such should exact their absolute courtesy, they could not, and would not, forget what she had been. Her pride rose at the thought, and gave her strength to resist the temptation to throw everything but love to the winds. Love alone could never satisfy absolutely a woman of Annie Erskine's nature. She was too keenly sensitive to the other requirements of life.

'I wonder,' she said, looking not at the young man pleading so earnestly for her love, but away beyond him to where the moon was coming up from among the night shadows; 'I wonder,' she repeated half-dreamily, 'whether you love me well enough to do what I shall ask.'

'Try me, Annie. No knight-errant of yore ever loved lady as I love you, my dearest,' was the quick and passionate response.

'Well, will you try to find out for me the secret of my birth?'

The young Laird's countenance fell. It was certainly no easy task.

'Annie, think what you are asking. I fear it will be

almost an impossible quest. Better, far better, to let things remain as they are. I shall be proud and glad to wed you as you are, Annie, as the skipper's daughter or the Pearl of Orr's Haven. Don't be so hard on me.'

But Annie only shook her head. She had set her heart on this thing; and until this mystery were solved for her, even love had only a fleeting charm. She had become in a sense a creature of one idea, and until she should learn the secret of the sea she should never be at rest.

'Suppose that I were to do just as you say,' she began in a low, cold, passionless voice. 'Suppose I should think of nothing but my own selfish happiness; suppose I were to marry you, without taking a thought for your people, or whether such a marriage would be for your good, I know very well what the end of it would be. You know quite well that I am not fit to be your wife. I have not education, nor accomplishments, nor anything to fit me for such a position. Compare me with your own sister, and you will know very well what I mean.'

'There can be no comparison between you. I love my sister, Annie, but beside her you are peerless,' quoth the young laird hotly. 'If that is all your objection, it can never hold for a moment.'

'After a time,' she went on exactly as if she had not heard him, 'when you found that I did not know the ways of great ladies, and could not do honour to your house, you would begin to weary of the face you admire now, and then'— she added with a quick breath, which was almost a sob, 'I should lie, because I loved you, and I saw that we had made a mistake.'

'Annie, why will you torment yourself and me with these absurd fancies? Couldn't you trust me more than that? When I have loved you ever since we were children together in the Haven, do you think I could so quickly change?'

'I have read a great deal about marriage. It is a great

trial of faith and love. I should be afraid to marry as you wish me,' said Annie, apparently quite unmoved by his passionate words—only apparently. In reality her heart was throbbing with the intensity of her pain. There had not been very much sunshine in her life. She had had to labour at menial toil, and find such brightness as she might in the austere routine of the household ruled by Janet Erskine. It showed strength of will that she could make even outwardly so good a stand. For it was a sweet prospect Archie Grant held out to her. His love was honest and true; he had not been playing with her, as Janet Erskine had said; it was as a wife he loved her, not an idle plaything to wile away a passing hour. That very knowledge gave a sweetness to her courage, even while it had its own bitterness.

'Then what am I to do? What is there to be between us?' he asked, drawing himself up, and speaking a little more coldly.

Oh, how noble he looked, thought Annie, as she uplifted her eyes to his face, to which the trembling moonbeams seemed to give an unusual paleness. How noble! and how worthy a woman's love!

She turned her head one moment from him, for just then her courage failed her. He misunderstood her, and his lips took a sterner curve.

'I have offered you as honest and true a love, Annie Erskine, as ever man offered to woman, and you have acknowledged that you do care a little for me. That being so, what right have you to inflict such misery on yourself and me? You will not marry Adam Erskine, you say. Is there anybody else you would prefer to me?'

'No,' she said, in an almost voiceless whisper.

'Then, in the name of wonder, what do you mean?' he cried, in his hot-headed way. 'I never thought you a heartless coquette, Annie. Don't let me think it now. Tell me exactly what you wish—what you would like me to do—to prove that

I do love you. If it is within reason or possibility, I'll do it, or know the reason why.'

She hesitated another moment, and then came nearer to him. He would have taken her to his heart again, but she held up a deprecating hand.

'I will tell you,' she said, and her sweet voice was very gentle, and had a tone of weariness in it. 'If you can discover who and what I am, and if my birth would not disgrace your name,—and I sometimes feel that it would not,—I shall marry you, if you still desire it, but not before.'

Archie Grant laughed.

'Annie, I never heard anything so cool. What do you take me for? Do you think I am going to expend labour on a search which may have such a doubtful issue? I'll make a better bargain than that, my sweet, and one ten times more reasonable. I'll do what I can to discover the secret of your birth, but you will marry me whatever the consequences. Will you sign the agreement?'

She smiled a little, though her eyes were troubled. He would not leave his case entirely in her hands. Perhaps she loved him the better for his masterful way.

He saw her hesitation, and laughed outright. There was something at once boyish and manly about Archie Grant, but his mind was absolutely fixed on one point—that he should win Annie Erskine. And he belonged to a determined race.

'Annie, I believe you are convinced of your own unreasonableness,' he said. 'Come, is the bargain made?'

'Let us go away home. See, it is quite dark. I am afraid when I think what mother will say to me.'

'She shall say what she has to say to me to-night, Annie. Henceforth I am responsible for you, and whoever speaks a harsh word to you will have to answer for it to me.'

It was impossible not to be touched by these words, and by the air of manly and protecting tenderness which accompanied

them. They were passing sweet to Annie Erskine; and the tears welled suddenly in her eyes.

She stretched out both her hands to him, with a gesture of love and trust which were eloquent.

'Forgive me. As long as I live I shall remember how you have loved me. Whatever the end may be, I can always look back on this night, and think about what you have said.'

'Then you do care a little for me, Annie, my dearest?'

'A great deal more than life,' she answered, and trembled in his close clasp.

'Then nothing, please God, shall part us but death,' said Archie Grant, and took off his cap as if he were registering a vow. They walked back to the Haven by the upland path arm-in-arm together, with the clear moonlight to guide them on their way. Archie talked all the way, happy talk of the future they were to share together, he said. He was so absorbed in these glowing visions that he did not observe how very silent his companion was. Did she hear? Ah, yes; every word fell like sweetest melody on ear and heart. Her hand was on his arm, and it clung there with a close and tender touch. For this night, at least, she belonged to him; she was his, chosen out from all the world to be his dearest. She had no hope; looking forward, a prevision of sorrow was with her; she felt that she must meet and say good-bye to love to-night. And yet why should she feel so? Was he not at her side, strong, tender, and true, telling her again and again that nothing should part them? The lights were twinkling in the hamlet as they descended the slope of the upland path to the top of the school brae.

A man passed them, and peered curiously at them. Annie tried to withdraw her hand, but it was kept a close prisoner.

'Do you think shame of me, Annie? Am I not a well-favoured suitor?' laughed Archie Grant in the lightness of his heart. She said nothing, grudging the moments passing one by one. It was quite dark when they reached the cottage.

Even the kitchen shutters were closed ; an unusual thing, and which to Annie boded ill.

'Will you tell me again?' she said brokenly, as they paused on the step. As she spoke her hand stole up to his tall shoulder, and rested there with a clinging touch which sent a quick thrill to Archie Grant's heart. No need to record his answer. For a moment Annie threw off her reserve, and let him know her heart. It was because the dull shadow of the coming desolation had already fallen upon her. Within the house, which was now no home, she felt that Janet Erskine was waiting to sit in judgment, and to darken anew the whole horizon of her life.





CHAPTER XII.

JANET ERSKINE'S JUDGMENT.



think, if you don't mind it to-night, it would be better for me to go in by myself,' said Annie, after a little, releasing herself from the sheltering arms.

'But, Annie, if there are any hard words to be said to you I must take the blame,' said Archie, smiling, for he was at that moment so absolutely happy that nothing seemed a trouble or a care.

'Oh, there will be no hard words, at least I shall not mind them to-night,' said Annie shyly; 'and you know I promised mother to be home before the darkening, and I am sure it is nine o'clock or more. Perhaps she has gone to bed, but the door is always on the latch. There are no robbers in the Haven.'

As she spoke there was the noise of a wooden chair being pushed on the stone floor, and a very ominous cough indicated that Janet Erskine had heard their voices, and wished them to know it. Archie noticed Annie start and the slight colour rise in her cheek, so he pushed open the door and marched boldly in, keeping hold of Annie's arm.

'Good evening, Mrs Erskine,' he said cheerily. 'Are you going to scold? Scold me, then, for I, and I alone, am the delinquent. Annie and I have been star-gazing as far as St. Abb's. What do you think of that?'

'I don't think well of it, sir,' responded Janet Erskine, and her face was as dark as night. 'What I think is that the skipper will need to take Annie in hand, since I can't keep her from being the talk of the place.'

Annie's face crimsoned, and unconsciously she clenched her hands, but she uttered no words.

'And if *you* think it a right thing, Mr. Archie, to keep a young girl out on these braes in the night, then you'll have to be taught differently,' continued the angry woman, knitting her brows and compressing her lips. 'You'll please to remember, sir, that what's play to you is ruin to her. And now you can go your way. Annie, it's time you were in bed. I have naught to say to you after this. It's the skipper, as I said, who must deal with you; and I wish he may be able, for a more headstrong, careless, indifferent girl I never saw.'

Up to Archibald Grant's face rushed all the hot blood of his race. His blue eyes flashed, and with one step he was at Annie's side, and had his arm about her drooping shoulders, for she looked crushed with the weight of Janet Erskine's anger.

'Address your remarks to me, if you please, Mrs. Erskine, and be so good as to remember that when you are speaking to Annie, you are speaking to the future Lady Grant of St. Veda's. Annie put on your hat and come back to St. Veda's with me. They shall know to night what you are to me. I cannot leave my future wife to be subjected to such insulting words.'

Still Annie never spoke. She was trembling from head to foot.

A slow, bitter smile was on Janet Erskine's set lips when she again found her voice.

'So be it,' she said, in a voice of curious calm. 'The future Lady Grant is welcome to seek the shelter of St. Veda's. She is not welcome here.'

Then Annie broke from her lover's side and, with a swift passionate gesture, knelt on one knee at Janet Erskine's feet.

Even the happiness of love could not take the sting from these cruel words. To be told she was no longer welcome in the home which had sheltered her since childhood was more than she could bear.

'Mother! mother!' she cried; 'don't be so cruel, so harsh, to me. I do not deserve it. I have never disobeyed you but in one thing, and I cannot force my heart. I cannot go away. I have nowhere to go. Let me wait at least till father comes home.'

'Get up, my darling; you shall not kneel to her,' said Archie hotly. 'Mrs. Erskine, if you have the heart of a woman, much less of a mother, bid her not kneel to you. I cannot bear it. One day, Annie, this shall be atoned for.'

'I have said my say,' said Janet Erskine, turning coldly away. 'Let her go if she wishes. She has chosen between us, but I should like to see the faces of your kinsfolk this night, Archibald Grant, when you take her up. I'm thinking you have spoken in foolish haste.'

Annie rose then. Her tears were gone, her emotion, swift and passionate though it had been, seemed to be pent once more in her breast.

'I think you had better go home now,' she said quietly, turning her sad, pathetic eyes on her lover's face. 'Nay, don't say anything more. Mother is right. I could not go to St. Veda's. Besides, I shall not leave my home here till father bids me. It is his house, and he will be home to-morrow.'

'I shall tell him how you have been treated if *you* don't,' said Archie gloomily, and darting an expressive glance at Mrs. Erskine's sour visage. 'Well, if you bid me go, I must. But very early to-morrow, my darling, I shall be back, and my mother will be with me. There shall be no repetition of this scene, I promise you.'

And before Janet Erskine's very eyes he took Annie in his arms, and bade God bless and keep her; and, without a word, good or bad, to the elder woman, strode out of the house.

After he left there was a period of silence in Adam Erskine's cottage which had something terrible in it. Oh, if Adam, dreaming sweetly on the moonlit sea, could have seen Annie, white-faced and miserable, standing like a hunted thing, what would he have said? Janet Erskine turned her back, and began to fold the white coverlet from off her own bed. Her face at that moment was not pleasant to look upon. Her causeless anger against Annie had reached a height, and the child she had loved so well was for the time an object of aversion to her. Why? Simply because her will, which had hitherto been paramount in the house, had received its first check at the hands of Annie. She had laid her plans for the marrying of these two young people, and it was intolerable to her that there should be a sudden stop put to her planning. But in the end it would do her good.

She needed a sharp lesson; perhaps had it come a little earlier she had learned it more easily. Meanwhile Annie was the sufferer; but in comparison with Janet Erskine, who was the prey of selfish, and even evil, thoughts, she was to be envied.

'You can go to your bed,' she said at length, in a short, sharp, jerky fashion. 'If you want anything to eat, there is the press—only don't speak to me. I wish to have no more to say to you. To-morrow father will decide what is to be done.'

'Yes,' whispered Annie softly. 'To-morrow father will be here.'

Her voice was tremulous with tenderness. Very well did Annie know how safe she was with 'father.' He never misunderstood, never misjudged her. She would be his 'dear lamie,' she knew, for evermore.

Janet Erskine saw the sweet smile hovering about the girl's mouth, and a fierce jealousy smote her anew. She felt that Annie was making a comparison, and that it was not in her favour. To what lengths will not a jealous, angry woman go.

'Did you hear me tell you to go to your bed?' she said sharply.

'I heard, but I could not sleep. Let me sit here for a little. I will not speak nor disturb you,' said Annie meekly. She had been trained to obey, and though it was not the obedience of love, she gave it still.

'I suppose you want to sit and dream over the fine lover who has told you so many lies to-night. Girl, when I saw you, who have been brought up in this godly household, standing so shamelessly by his side, I wondered a judgment did not fall upon you.'

'Is this a godly household?' asked Annie, in scorn, for she was sorely tried. 'If *you* are godly, I would rather be as I am. You think the very worst of people. It is better not to be godly, I think, and to be more kindly.'

'Will you hold your tongue and not poison the place with your wicked talk,' said Janet Erskine, with blazing eyes. 'You are uplifted because the Laird has spoken honied words to you. I tell you, girl, they'll bring you nothing but shame and woe. His wife! Do you think they will ever consent? Why, even he, in his sober moments, will repent. They are a proud race; and no nameless woman, I tell you, will ever be allowed to share their name.'

Annie turned about and fled through the open door out into the night. Oh, poor, riven, tortured young heart! She may be forgiven if her thoughts were wild and dark and rebellious. Janet Erskine's words went home, and for a space faith and love and hope fled far from Annie Erskine. The spray dashing against the rocks was not saltier than the bitter tears which burned her eyes.

Meanwhile Archibald Grant has reached his home, to find his people anxiously awaiting his return.

'There is a telegram from papa, Archie,' his mother said, meeting him in the hall. 'Where have you been, my boy? Your father wishes you to go up to London to-night by the mail. The message says the business is urgent.'

'To London to-night?' quoth Archie blankly. 'Impossible.'

'Now it is nearly so. Where *have* you been?' queried his mother hastily. 'I have done what I could. John has gone to wire the mail to stop for you at Reston. Your portmanteau is ready. You must get something to eat, and ride off on Hero at once. You can stable him at Reston, and John will go over for him in the morning.'

'To London to-night,' repeated Archie blankly. 'But I can't'—

'What!' Not often did Lady Grant speak so sharply. 'You forget what you are saying, my son. Your father wants you. His wish is a command which must be obeyed. I myself am anxious and troubled. I cannot imagine what this pressing trouble can be. Have you not fancied your father looking harassed and worried of late?'

'I did not notice. If I must go, then, what time have I? When must I leave?'

'The mail is due at Berwick at 12.15. You will know Hero's speed better than I.'

'I have an hour yet, then. Has Ethel gone to bed, mother?'

'Yes. We could not imagine what had become of you. Where were you?'

'I have been out with Annie Erskine, mother,' returned Archie at once. 'Come into the library while I will tell you something. I am going to ask you to be very kind to me, mother.'

The slightest possible shade of alarm was mingled with Lady Grant's wonder as she slipped her hand through her son's arm and allowed him to lead her into the room.

'Am I not always kind to you, my son?' she asked, with a slight smile.

'Oh yes; but you are to be extra special now. I want you to extend your sweet kindness to somebody I love very much. Can you guess whom?'

'No, how can I?' asked Lady Grant, but her face visibly paled.

They had now entered the library. The ashes of the wood fire had burned low on the hearth, and there was a pleasant, warm odour in the room. Lady Grant turned up the lamp on the table, and then looked anxiously at her son. A vague sense of uneasiness oppressed her.

'What do you mean, Archie?' she asked, kindly enough, but with a certain pride of tone which indicated a slight displeasure.

'Mother, I love Annie Erskine; I am going to marry her,' he began impetuously. 'She is miserable down there. That woman Janet Erskine is not fit to have the care of her. If I must go to London to-night, will you go down to the Haven to-morrow morning and bring Annie up here?'

'What!'

There was no mistaking the clear, proud ring of the voice now. Archie started, and looked concernedly at his mother. Her face, always pale, looked white in the dim light, and there was no smile of kindness upon it. He had not anticipated any serious obstacle or objection. He knew that Annie was beloved at St. Veda's, but he forgot that there is love *and* love. Lady Grant, in spite of all her sweetness and gentleness, had her own pride. Birth, honour, prestige were dear to her.

'Don't look so horrified, mother,' said Archie, with an attempt at gaiety. 'You know how lovely and bewitching Annie is. You can't wonder that I should have learned it to my cost. She loves me, mother, and after she has been a little while beside you and Ethel, she will be perfect.'

'I daresay. I think you must be mad, Archie. I am amazed to hear you speak. Love you! I daresay she does. She has fine ideas. I never thought what a frightful issue might come of her visiting here. It was Ethel's whim. Apparently we are to pay dearly for it. But of course you are not in earnest.'

'Earnest!' repeated Archie blankly. 'In the name of

wonder, why should I not be in earnest? Would I be likely to say such a thing in jest? I have always cared for Annie—though absence only has taught me how much. She must and shall be my wife, or I will have none. Besides, I have promised, and no Grant ever broke his plighted word. In earnest! Why, I would have brought her to you to-night if she wou'd have come.'

He saw the mistake he had made, and was glad, for Annie's sake, that she had not come. Lady Grant sat suddenly down. She felt faint and trembling, but her face did not relax.

Archie was about to see the proud, hard side of his mother's nature. Hitherto life had been all sunshine for her. We were thankless mortals if we did not smile in the sun. It is the storm which proves the grit.

'I think, Archibald, that you must be mad.'

For the first time in her life she called him Archibald, and the name sounded cold and distant in his ears.

'Mother,' he said anxiously, 'is it possible that you will not befriend Annie and me at this time? Why, I thought I had only to speak and it would be all right.'

'Yes, and you made a mistake. You are a foolish boy, Archie, and we must send you away again to forget this folly. As for Annie, I shall see her to-morrow.'

There was a moment's silence. Then Archie drew himself up, and began to speak with a courage which made a man of him. True, ay true to the heart's core was he, and would do honour to the motto of his race.

'Listen to me, mother. You speak to me as if I were a boy. I am four-and-twenty, and I am in dead earnest about this. I shall make Annie Erskine my wife at any cost. Whatever you may say you cannot but acknowledge that she will not be a disgrace to our name. I have given you my full confidence, and I ask you, because I love you next best to Annie, to be kind to her for my sake. Will you do it?'

Next best to Annie! The mother's pride rebelled. Oh

these women's hearts of ours! What a mystery they are! How selfish our love even in its very unselfishness! Only the God who made us can understand us.

'You do me a high honour,' she said coldly, and rose to her feet.

'Then you will not go to the Haven to-morrow?' he said quietly. 'I cannot go to London to-night. I have a duty to the poor girl to whom I have passed my word. I shall wire papa that I can't come till to-morrow night.'

Lady Grant had turned towards the fire, and stood with her white hands clasped, looking down at the smouldering ashes.

Her silk gown, sweeping the floor in its long train, gave to her really slight figure height and dignity. Archie Grant had never thought his mother formidable before; he did not really know anything of her strength of will. She was thinking. How rapidly in such keen moments can a woman's mind travel a vast space, and arrive at conclusions! She saw immediately that a little diplomacy was required to deal with this headstrong boy.

At length she turned, and a smile dawned on her face.

'Don't let us fall out, Archie,' she said, with a sweet little laugh. 'If you are in love with Annie, of course we can't help it. You must not be astonished at me. Your announcement was so unlooked for. Of course I shall see Annie to-morrow, and perhaps scold her for giving me this shock.'

A smile like a gleam of sudden sunshine instantly dispelled the gloom in Archie's face. In the fulness of his gratitude he clasped his mother in his arms and kissed her.

'Now, you are my own sweet, kind mother,' he said heartily. '*You will* be kind to Annie to-morrow, mother, and see her very early. She is wretched down there.'

'Yes, I will see her. If I am not able to go, I shall send such a message as will bring her,' responded Lady Grant, still smiling. 'Now, run, I would not have you disappoint your

father for worlds. I am so anxious about him, my boy, I cannot rest.'

'Oh, he will be all right,' Archie assured her, for in a moment all his troubles seemed to have flown. 'You will explain to Annie, mother, how I had to go away ; or, perhaps, I had better write a note. I have still time. I shall come down to-morrow night again if possible.'

'Yes, yes ; I'll make it all right with Annie.'

'And you'll keep her here. The thought of her life with that woman is intolerable to me.'

'And yet "that woman" has given her a mother's love and care for more than twenty years,' said Lady Grant, a trifle drily. 'But, yes, yes ; I'll keep Annie, if she will stay.'

The latter half of the sentence was adroitly put, and would afterwards remove all responsibility from Lady Grant's shoulders.

But Archie, open and guileless as the day, suspected no undercurrent, and went to pour out his heart in a hurriedly written epistle to Annie.

Within the hour he was on his way to join the mail at Reston.





CHAPTER XIII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

ANNIE ERSKINE passed a sleepless night, and rose early. She had the kitchen fire lighted and the kettle singing before Janet Erskine awoke. Annie was noiseless in her movements, and when she saw her mother soundly sleeping, she slipped about on tiptoe, fearing to awake her. How thoughtful the girl was in little things, even for her who was so causelessly harsh!

There was a curious atmosphere in the skipper's house that morning—a kind of quiet, settled calm. It was as if the worst blast had passed. Janet Erskine dressed herself quickly and methodically as usual, and without speaking a word. The breakfast was on the table by the time she was ready, and Annie, dainty and fresh in spite of her weary night, waiting for her.

‘Did you hear the wind in the night?’ Annie asked, as she put the sugar in the cups. She spoke quietly but pleasantly enough, and Janet could not but answer.

‘No. I had my sleep to divert me,’ she answered. ‘Are the boats in?’

‘One or two. The *Cynthy* and the *Katie Morison* are outside the bar; but there is no word of father and Adam,’ answered Annie. ‘Are you ready? Will I pour out the tea?’

'Yes, I'm ready. You've been very smart this morning, or it's I who have been very lazy. I see it's near eight.'

So saying Janet Erskine drew in her chair, and, with a solemn and righteous face, said the long grace. She was conscious of no deviation from the right way; it was Annie, she considered, who had strayed. Janet was in her own eyes one of the 'unco guid.' She thought she could not err. In her treatment of Annie she imagined herself following the dictates of Scripture. She did not believe much in the gentle rule of love.

'I see it's been a good stiff breeze by the look of the sea. They've missed the tide, and can't be in now till the afternoon. I wonder what luck they've had.'

'Not much, I think. At least the *Katie Morison* did not bring in much, for I saw them unload her,' Annie answered, as she played with the bit of bread on her plate. There was bacon on the table and poached eggs, but she offered to touch neither. Janet saw well enough what a poor pretence her eating was, but would not press her. She thought it all a little piece of acting on the girl's part; and yet, poor Annie, her heart was heavy enough.

About half-past eight a page-boy from the Castle came past the window, and knocked at the door. Janet went to open it, and returned with two sealed envelopes, which she threw down on the table without uttering a word. Annie quietly lifted them, and sitting down began to read them without the slightest show of confusion. Janet, busy making the bed, watched her from under her half-veiled eyes, and saw how sweet was the glimmer of the smile which touched her lips as she read. When she had read both she let her hands drop on her lap, and her eyes wandered through the half-open lattice to where the morning sun was glinting on the sea. Janet saw how absorbed she was, and a fierce desire to know the contents of these letters took possession of her. But Annie did not offer them, but simply slipped them into her pocket,

and began to clear away the breakfast things from the table.

'I am going up to the Castle after I have done up my work,' she said after a while, a speech to which Janet vouchsafed no reply. And there was no other word spoken in the cottage until nearly noon, when Annie was dressed to go up to the Castle.

'I'm going into Eyemouth to-day,' Janet said, when she saw Annie all ready. 'If you come back before me, you'll get the key above the door.'

'I'll be back in a little while,' Annie answered. 'Likely before you go away.'

So saying she walked out of the door. She did not for a moment dream of giving her mother any confidence. She considered, and perhaps rightly, that that right had been forfeited. It was not easy to forget the sting of last night's words.

The tide was receding, and the beach under the cliff quite passable, so Annie chose the low road to the Castle. She felt very strange that morning. A sense of unreality dwelt with her. It was as if she were walking in her sleep, or taking part only in a dream in the drama of life. It *was* a drama for Annie Erskine; each day some new and exciting situation was forced upon her. She felt no apprehension about her visit to the Castle. Her lover's note had been tender and reassuring, and though Lady Grant's was not long, it seemed kind enough. It only asked her to come up as soon as possible to the Castle, as she was not able to come down. But though Annie had not much misgiving concerning her interview with Lady Grant, there was little joyousness in her heart. A weight lay on her spirits. She felt as if she stood on the brink of some serious undertaking, the issue of which was shrouded in uncertainty. But she was calm in the midst of it. She felt that whatever transpired she would be able to meet it, and to act in any emergency. A brave, fearless spirit was in the girl, and her pride was a noble pride, which would not stoop

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nor cringe. Lady Grant would find her a match for her in that respect.

When she arrived at the Castle she was admitted by Isabella, who, not having forgotten the rebuke her young lady had administered to her yesterday, looked at Annie with no favourable eye. But she had the prudence to be outwardly civil, and having already received her instructions from her mistress, ushered the skipper's lass into the morning-room. Lady Grant had made an effort and come down from her own apartments earlier than usual to see Annie Erskine. She had not slept much in the night, being kept awake by her planning how to settle this foolish love affair satisfactorily before it should be too late. She looked very sweet and kind when Annie, somewhat timidly, entered the room; and, coming swiftly forward, she took the girl's two hands in hers and kissed her cheek. The tears rushed to Annie's eyes at the kindness of her reception, and she took it to mean that she was made welcome by the mother of her lover.

'Come away, Annie. You look as fresh as a daisy this morning,' Lady Grant said smilingly, and drew Annie down on the couch beside her. She had a difficult task to perform, but she would win the day by gentle means. She did not think Annie would be unreasonable or difficult to deal with. She knew the girl's proud spirit, and that it would be a material help in the settling of this delicate question. An end must be put at once and for ever to whatever had been between Annie and the young Laird. Lady Grant's mind was quite made up on that point.

'And how are they all in the Haven this morning, my dear? Have the boats come in? It blew quite a gale in the night.'

'Yes, I know. They have not come home yet, my lady, though there are one or two boats in the bay. The sea is quite wild this morning.'

'Did you come by the shore?'

'Yes. Is Miss Ethel quite well this morning?'

'Yes. She is not downstairs yet. Is she not a lazy girl? But you will not mind not seeing her to-day. I wished to see you quite by yourself, and hoped you would come early.'

'Yes,' said Annie, and her eyes fell. Lady Grant laid her hand reassuringly on hers, and began to speak in a low, kind voice.

'Well, my dear, I suppose you have had a note from that foolish boy of mine. You would be surprised to hear of his sudden call away. Sir Archie seems to have some serious business in hand. I hope it does not forebode trouble, but I cannot help being apprehensive. And, now, what an. I to say to you, Annie, about this affair?' Her voice was perfectly kind, there was no note of reproach or displeasure in it, but it fell coldly on Annie's sensitive ear. She knew in a moment that there was disappointment and regret in Lady Lilian's heart.

'I don't know, my lady,' was all she said, and she did not lift her head.

'My dear child, don't look so woebegone,' said Lady Grant cheerfully. 'I don't blame you in the least, you may be very sure of that. I know you too well, my dear. It is my headstrong boy I blame, and I am going to show you how absolute is my confidence in you by asking you to help me in this matter. He told me last night that he had asked you to be his wife. I suppose it is quite true?'

'Yes, it is quite true.'

'And what did you say? Did you make any promise?'

Annie did not speak. She did not choose to give up her precious memories in answer to this cross-questioning.

'Well, Annie, you will not speak, I see. What do you think of it? Tell me that. Do you think, my dear, that you would be happy as his wife?'

Still Annie did not speak.

'I wish you to be quite sure, my dear, that I haven't brought you here to make you miserable, or to insist that you

shall give up any claim you may have on my son,' said Lady Grant, kindly enough still, though her voice unconsciously hardened a little. 'I only wish to lay the matter quite plainly before you. Young people, as I remember well in my own early experiences, do not stop to think anything about what is prudent or for the best. I would save you future misery, my child, if I could. I have seen a great deal of unhappiness resulting from hastily contracted marriages. Will you let me point out to you the two sides of this question, and then you will decide for yourself? Whatever be the result, I will endeavour to be pleased. You see what confidence I have in you, Annie. I am not so selfish as many mothers would be in such a case.'

Annie bowed her head. She was not surprised. She seemed to have expected to hear the death-knell rung for her own sweet hopes. It was in keeping with the shadows which played darkly round her life.

'We have only one son, Annie, and he is the pride and hope of our lives. Our darling Ethel we seem to hold by so slender a thread, that we dare not build any hopes upon her. Perhaps that has made us look more to the boy. We have sacrificed something to prepare him for a noble future. We are not rich, Annie, and sometimes care sits as darkly at our door as on any cottage threshold. We have destined our son for a political career. Perhaps you do not quite understand that?'

'No; tell me what it is, if you please,' said Annie. She wanted to know everything, so that she might decide her action. It was a matter of life or death to her.

'Very soon then, Annie, we hope and expect that he will go to London as a Member of Parliament, where, if he serves his party with all his ability and strength, he will rise to a great position; we look forward to seeing him one of the leaders in the House. It would take a long time to explain the whole details of political life to you, Annie, but one point

I wish to make clear to you. Before a man can succeed politically and socially in London, he must have a wife who can be of material help to him. Although their influence is unseen, it is the ladies, the wives of those in Parliament, who make or mar the success of the party in power. The life of a politician's wife, Annie, if she has her husband's interest at heart—and if she has not she is no true wife—is a life of constant anxiety and toil. His success is in her hands.'

'But how is that? Women do not go into Parliament or make speeches.'

'No, but their social influence is very great. They must be able to win people to the side their husbands take. They must entertain and amuse and conciliate even those who are unapproachable. A man whose wife is a social failure may retire from public life, Annie, for he will never have any influence.'

Annie remained silent. She did not understand fully the meaning of the words 'social failure;' but one thing stood out, oh, very, very clearly in her mind, that she could be no wife for Archibald Grant.

'My husband has been sadly hampered by a delicate wife. Had my health permitted, he would not have been living the quiet life of a country gentleman. He has sacrificed himself for me, but his hopes have blossomed and his ambition revived again in his son. Do you think, Annie, that you could fill the position I have sketched? Do you think you could hide a sore and indignant heart under pleasant smiles? Do you think you could receive your husband's enemies with courtesy and friendliness? Do you think you could, by your consummate tact, exercise an influence among the leaders of London society which would be invaluable to him, and win him support he could never hope to gain by any other means? That is what he must have in a wife, or he may write Ichabod opposite his public life.'

Annie shook her head.

'No,' she replied, in a low voice. 'I should be worse than useless, I see; I should be a hindrance and a drag. I am glad you have told me this. I could not have understood it otherwise.'

Lady Grant's heart smote her, though she implicitly believed every word she had uttered. It contained truth, no doubt, but the truth was exaggerated to make an insurmountable obstacle in the eyes of the girl before her.

'My child,'—her fingers closed softly and kindly over Annie's tightly clasped hands,—'we could wish no sweeter, dearer wife for our boy, and, so far as appearance goes, I am certain you would create a sensation wherever you went. But in a little that would wear off, and people would see only the defects. I would not hurt you, Annie, but you must know as well as I that your upbringing has not fitted you for such a position. It is impossible ever to efface the traces of early training. You would be constantly reminded and vexed by mistakes you would commit, and which would lay you open to misunderstanding and censure. The intricate web of social courtesy and etiquette cannot be learned in an hour. I admit that it is foolish and trivial to place so much emphasis on such points; but it is the little things which sting, and I have before now seen a man's love change and grow cold because his wife so often, though unwittingly, raised a blush to his cheek. Annie, it has made my heart sore, and had it been any one I loved, I could hardly have borne it.'

Annie never spoke. She sat, indeed, so motionless that it might have been thought she was uninterested and indifferent. But it was not so. Oh, no! Every word sank deep, deep into her heart, and would remain there to make a living sorrow.

'That is the darker side, Annie. I wish it were not so true,' said Lady Grant. 'And now, my dear, you have to make up your mind. I can trust you. And if you still think you will hold my son to his promise, I will do what I

can to help you. Oh, if I could have foreseen this twenty years ago, I should have insisted on bringing you from the wreck to St. Veda's.'

Lady Grant was sincere in what she said. She was not a heartless woman, but she was not quite prepared for the sacrifice of seeing her one son marry a nameless girl from out among the people. He who, by right of his name and heritage, might mate with the highest in the land. Annie rose to her feet. The little lace scarf, which had become unfastened at her throat, she tied with fingers which did not falter.

Her face wore a calm, thoughtful expression, but in her eyes there was a curious dazed look which Lady Grant did not observe. She wondered, moreover, to see her so calm.

'Don't hurry away, my dear. Sit down for a little, and let us talk this thing well over. I have not said half I wanted.'

'I think we have said enough,' said Annie, in a low voice. 'I think, if you please, I would like to go—away'—

The momentary hesitation at the last word had something pathetic in it. She had been about to say 'home,' but remembered that she had in reality no home.

'My child, I cannot let you go like this,' said Lady Grant with real kindness, for her heart went out to the girl before her. 'You have not misunderstood me, Annie? You believe I love you? My dear, if I loved you less I could not have so spoken.'

'Yes; I know you are all that is good and kind, as you have always been,' said Annie, with a little wintry smile. 'Will you read this note he—he sent me this morning, and then tell me what I must do?'

Poor, proud, brave girl! She would be loyal and true whatever the cost. She drew Archie's letter from her pocket, and gave it to his mother. As she read it the passionate and endearing words touched the more selfish side of the mother's heart. She grudged Annie Erskine the love which had prompted these words.

'He is very much in love just now,' she said, a trifle coldly, as she handed back the letter. 'It is for you, my dear, to make up your mind. He will not listen to reason. I have done what I can, and, whatever the future, shall have nothing to reproach myself with.'

'And if I was to hold him to this promise I should have everything to reproach myself with,' said Annie drearily. 'I have made up my mind. He will not need to write that word you said after his career through me. He will forget me and marry, as he should, a great lady, who will be able to do all you have said.'

'And you, my dear, brave, unselfish Annie,' said Lady Grant impulsively, though her heart gave a bound of relief. There was infinite determination in the girl's whole demeanour which told that she had weighed her words. 'What will you do? Would you like me to help you away from the place? I will do anything, Annie, that you think best. You know Archie, how headstrong he is. I fear that if you saw him often you could not hold out.'

'I know. I will think about it. Whatever happens I shall not marry him. It would kill me to think I was any hindrance to his success. You can trust me, Lady Grant.'

'You will let me see you again, Annie. My child, my heart is sore for you.'

'You are very kind. You have taken a great deal of trouble with me. Good-bye.'

Lady Grant felt loth to let her go. A vague uneasiness haunted her. She did not like that quiet, still, self-possessed manner. It betokened an unnatural self-control. She could have dealt better with tears or hasty words.

But Annie would not stay. She said good-bye very gently, received but did not return the parting kiss, and went her way.

Never more to cross that threshold as Annie Erskine, never more.



CHAPTER XIV.

'LUCY'S FLITTIN'.'

THE sun was shining very brightly as Annie Erskine left the Castle entrance and crossed the lawn to enter on the narrow path leading to the shore. She walked with her head down, and did not see Ethel waving to her from one of the upper windows. The daisies on the sward seemed to dance before her eyes, which were dim with the bitterness of her pain. It was all over—over for evermore—the brief, bright dream which had for an hour dispersed the shadows from her life. The vision of that future, so full of a boundless bliss, which she had pictured for herself in the silent night watches, had had its rude awakening, and once more she was face to face with the reality of life. Life! What was it for her now? Could she continue the dreary routine at the cottage, subject to the vagaries of Janet Erskine's jealous temper? Could she pass days in that solitary house, without opening her lips to a creature, or hearing a kindly human voice? No; such days must have an end. There was one way, she knew, whereby the old-time peace and comfort could be restored. She lingered a moment at the little stone gateway which guarded the stair in the rock, and looked over the expanse of the sea. Oh, how fair it was! Nothing but sunshine and peace there. The yellow sands of the Fife coast

were glistening in the sun, and the white wings of many a pleasure boat were fluttering in every sheltered haven. On the open sea the brown sails of the fishing boats were filled with the softening breeze, the wind had nearly fallen, and the heaving of the water was stilled once more. Out somewhere on that blue expanse were the two leal hearts who loved her dearly, and whom no circumstances could ever change. Tender thoughts of them both filled her yearning heart, and for a brief space she was tempted, being weary of the struggle of life, to think more kindly of the love Adam Erskine had offered her. As his wife she would at least be at peace, and would have the shelter of a good man's home, where no trouble would touch her if he could keep it away. It seemed an easy way out of the difficulty with which she was beset. There were only the two alternatives. She must either fall in with Janet Erskine's planning, or put some great distance between them. There was no other way. The primrose path of love which last night had opened up before her happy eyes, was to-day shut fast by the iron gates of duty and unselfishness. These two had helped her to decide. She loved Archibald Grant so dearly that she would not mar his life. And yet her very heart clave to him. Remembering the close pressure of his arm, the earnest tones of his voice, the look on his face, her courage almost faltered. Oh, all these had been to her so passing sweet! A dry, bitter sob broke from her lips, she turned open the gate, and hurried down the rough steps with faltering feet, her tears falling all the while. Her self-control was broken now, and she was a very woman, crying for the thing she had with her own hands put beyond her reach. She sped home without lingering, as she often did, on the pebbly shore; and when she arrived at the cottage, she found the door locked, as she had expected and hoped. It would have been no ordinary trial to have faced her mother just then. The key was, however, in the overhanging tiles above the door, and when she entered she locked it again behind

her. The fire in the kitchen was built up with a 'gathering coal,' and only one dark red spot glimmered in the corner. It was not cold, but Annie drew in a stool close to it, and, sitting down, covered her face with her hands. The very stillness of death seemed to fill the house, the only sound being the slow ticking of the eight-day clock behind the door, a sound which had something strangely solemn in it. Once, even in the midst of her deep thinking, Annie lifted her head and looked at the face of the clock almost in awe. Its voice seemed to speak to her of eternity. She looked about the kitchen then with dim, pitiful eyes. It was familiar, and, oh, how dear! It was filled with the bright, sweet memories of childhood, which have no sting in them. How often had she slept, tired out with her playing in the sun, in that spotless white bed! How often had she watched the red firelight dancing on the burnished tins and on the old china bowls and quaint blue plates in the high rack above the dresser! How often had she as a child helped to polish the iron horses on the mantel-shelf—how often had she been allowed, as a great privilege, to play on the hearthrug with the china ladies and gentlemen, and the big white and black dogs on the high shelf! Quaint, old-fashioned, country-like in all its arrangements, the place was dear—ay, very dear—to the girl's heart.

She often remembered afterwards how she had looked at everything, and taken in every minute detail that afternoon. It was as if she had photographed the place indelibly on her memory and heart.

The clock struck two. Annie rose and went into the little closet in the lofty room where her box stood. It was not a large box, and she was strong. She took it by the two handles, and carried it into the middle of the kitchen floor. Then she opened the lid, and began to take out the things one by one. It was arranged in beautiful order. Her Bible lay on the top, and then there was a gay pasteboard box containing ribbons, gloves, and laces, and the few inexpensive ornaments

she possessed. Each one was a gift, and had its little story. That curious cameo brooch, cut in the shape of a dolphin, the skipper had brought from Yarmouth last summer, and the bog-oak harp mounted in gold, had come from Kildare when the *Janet Rae* had gone on an expedition to the fishing-grounds in the Irish Sea.

Below the little trifles there lay a snow-pile of dainty underclothing, all sewed by her own hand.

'Too many fal-lals about them,' Janet Erskine had often said; but Annie loved pretty things, and surrounded herself with them as she had opportunity.

She took out each article, until she came to the bottom of the box, where, wrapped in tissue paper, lay what was perhaps her dearest treasure. With tender fingers she unfolded the paper, and looked on the face of Archie Grant. It was the little sketch Ethel had given her, and with which the girl would never now part. Beside it there was a quaint netted silk purse, through which shone some golden sovereigns. Annie counted them out one by one—seven in all; there was also some loose silver in the box among the trinkets. Having carefully laid certain things on one side, she took down a black leather hand-bag from behind the door. It was an old-fashioned thing, but roomy inside, and not heavy in itself. Into that receptacle she put the best of her underclothing, the little box containing her trinkets, and a thin morning gown of dark blue calico. Then she made the colour-sketch into a little roll, tied it with a silk thread, and laid it beside her Bible on the top. It shut with difficulty, for it was well packed, but it was not too heavy for a strong girl like Annie Erskine to carry even a good bit. When the bag was filled, she replaced what was left neatly in the box, and carried it back to the closet in the lobby. She had on her best frock, which was very similar to her everyday garb, only the serge was finer; her blue sailor hat lay ready on the table. She took her waterproof mantle, her jacket, and a chinchilla fur

cape which the skipper had brought from England, and for which he was rated by Janet for his extravagance. But in his eyes nothing was too good for Annie.

When all these things were lying on the table in the window, Annie was ready for her journey. She was acting on a sudden impulse, and yet there was nothing nervous or hurried in her motions. She was perfectly calm, and arranged everything as if on a premeditated plan. It was now twenty minutes to three. There was an old time-table on the shelf beside the big Bible, which she took down and consulted. The train for the South passed Reston before half-past four. She had not very much time, but there was something else to be done. She must leave some explanation of her disappearance, lest they should think the sea had claimed her. This was the hardest task of all. To whom should she write? Not to Janet Erskine, who would doubtless be glad to be rid of her, nor to Adam, who had no right to know her movements; her farewell words must be written to her father, of whom during the last few days she had scarcely dared to think. I wonder shall I transcribe that letter—which was to be worn next to the heart of Adam Erskine the elder till death? They were very pitiful words, eloquent even in their brevity; they breathed forth the unspeakable yearning of the girl's heart.

'DEAR, DEAR FATHER,—I am doing what you will never be able to forgive me for. I am going away where you will not see me nor know anything about me. When you come home and hear what has happened in your absence, you will understand why I did it. I am going away because I am not strong enough to do my duty here. Father, don't break your dear heart about me. I have eight pounds, and I know what I am going to do. I know you will believe that I shall never, never do anything you would not like me to do. If you think about me, and oh, I know you must, you can be sure I am minding God and the lessons you taught me wherever I am. I promise

that if I am in any trouble or difficulty I will send for you. If you don't hear, you will know I am well. Don't seek after me, dear father, because I will not come back for a long time. Some day I shall see you again, and hear you say I am your "dear lammie." I cannot write any more, because my eyes are running over and my hand shaking. Don't blame anybody for this. It is my own doing. Tell Adam to forget me; but, oh, don't *you* forget, dear, dear father—Your loving

'ANNIE.'

It was a thoughtful letter, though a little rambling. She had omitted nothing which would make the shock less hard for the skipper. She knew her promise for the time of trouble would be a comfort to him. He believed in her implicitly, she knew; there was an absolute and exquisite trust between them. It was to save him a keener pain that she left him. For Adam Erskine loved his wife, too, and it is a terrible thing to be torn by two conflicting loves. There was a double unselfishness in Annie's action. It was for the sake of the two she loved best on earth that she was taking this step. It might be imprudent; but God, who judges by the motives of the heart, would watch over the child who was finding the way of life so perilously hard. So we can let her go forth without a fear. She sealed up the letter, and addressed it to Captain Erskine, and, setting it up on the mantelshelf, looked about her for the last, last time. And that was terrible. Oh, it is a sore wrench for a young thing to quit all that is familiar and most dear, and it was the nature of Annie Erskine to take things deeply to heart. Her eyes were blind with tears as they rested on each well-known object; and as she looked, the desire to carry something away with her filled her heart. It was something to remind her of her father she wanted, and the only thing she could see was his tobacco pouch, which, for a wonder, he had forgotten. She smiled as she lifted it and slipped it into her pocket. Some day, perhaps, in happier circumstances, she would restore it to him again. So, with

many a lingering glance, Annie Erskine gathered together her little all, and turned her back on Orr's Haven. The women folk in the hamlet liked an early tea, and as the school was not dismissed till four, the Haven was like a deserted village at that time. Annie went out by the front door, locked it, and laid the key where she had found it, then went round to the back, and through the garden to the little gate opening out on the School Brae. There was nobody in sight but a travelling wife with a basket and a red cotton bundle in her hand.

Annie pulled a sprig of peppermint and a handful of white roses from beside the gate, and not daring to look back, hurried away. It was a lovely afternoon—the August heat tempered by the fresh westerly breeze blowing in from the sea. The sky was cloudlessly blue, relieved by shafts of snowy white. Annie walked on quickly until she got to the top of the little hillock, from which she would have her last peep of the Haven. It had never looked fairer than that day—its red roofs bathed in the warm sunlight, and the blue sea in the foreground shimmering like a sheet of burnished gold. Involuntarily the girl's eyes travelled from the cottage to the Castle, which stood out in dark, striking relief against the clearness of the sky. Cottage and Castle! Should she ever look upon either of them again? She would never forget that picture; it would be her comfort yet in many a sad and regretful hour. She dared not linger, for her heart was breaking; so, with a sharp, sudden breath, she turned away, and so began her new life.

She took the field paths to Reston, fearing to encounter any one she knew. She only met one person, the farmer of Temple Hall, where she had spent many a happy evening.

'Hulloa, Annie Erskine, are ye for traiv'lin'?' he said cheerily, as he saw her bag. 'Ye'll be for the fower train are ye?'

'Yes, if I can get it. Is the mistress well?'

'Brawly. I'm jist gaun roond the fields, wonderin' whaur I'm to begin the hairst first. The hale thing's come upon us like a clap o' thunder.'

'Yes, it seems to be all ripe,' said Annie, looking on the golden fields on both sides of the path.

'A' weel doon by? Skipper oot?'

'Yes. Good-bye, Mr. Robertson; I must go on.'

'Ay; if ye're to get the train ye haena muckle time. It's no' often ye traivel; but young folk like a holiday. Wull it be lang or ye be back?'

'I don't know.'

'That's a daft answer,' said the farmer, with his loud, hearty laugh. 'Ye hae ower muckle cairryin' in this strong sun. If ye'd sent word up to Temple Ha', Jock wad hae brocht the pownie for ye. But we're a' unco independent in the Haven.'

Annie laughed too, and held out her hand.

'Weel, guid day; dinna heat yersel', my ooman, an dinna be lang o' comin' up. Ye're a fell favourite wi' the mistress, an' she's gey kittle to please wi' lasses,' said the farmer, with a twinkle in his eye, and, whistling to his collie, strode away. Something impelled him to look after Annie when he had gone on a little, but she was out of sight.

'I micht hae asked her where she's gaun. Kate 'll be spierin'. I've never heard that the Erskines had ony veesitin' relations ony gate. O'd, that's queer!'

Annie was thankful he had not asked, and held bravely on her way, keeping by the field paths, which were not only quieter, but took a mile or two off the way. It wanted but three minutes from the train time when she entered the station, feeling hot and tired, for it was important that she should not miss this train. She took ticket to Berwick, and came out there to await the train from the south. Edinburgh was her destination. She had time to get a cup of tea in the interval, which wonderiully refreshed her, and having bought a paper, she sat down very composedly in the waiting-room.

There was a wonderful self-possession about her. She had travelled very little, but she had none of that nervous awkwardness common to country folk who go on railway journeys.

A few minutes before six, the express came thundering into the station, and Annie took her place. There was no other stoppage before Edinburgh, and it flew past Reston at a speed which made it impossible for Annie to see anything. She had hoped for a glimpse of St. Veda's, a last glimpse before it should vanish perhaps for ever. The Haven, of course, was hidden in the hollow.

It was a quiet and lovely evening when she arrived in Edinburgh. She knew a little of the town, having spent a week in it once with her father when he had brought her to see the sights. She went straight to the little hotel in Cockburn Street, where they had lived that week, and asked for a room.

Curiously enough she was given the same one she had occupied before. And there she had to make her plans and decide what she was to do. She was cast on her own resources. She had her living to make. She was now an unit in the great city, and must take part in its hurry and its strife. She felt no fear. She had taken a momentous step for a young girl, but she believed she had done right.

And because of that conviction she could ask God to bless her and to guide her feet in this new and untrodden path.





CHAPTER XV.

WHAT THE SKIPPER SAID.

ANNIE was sitting quietly reading in the waiting-room at Berwick when Janet Erskine returned from her walk to Eyemouth. Her business there had entirely concerned Annie. There lived in Eyemouth a distant connection of Janet's who was married to a *fisher*, and was, as the country folk have it, 'in a gude way o' dacin'.'

Janet Erskine had gone to ask Mrs. Renton to look out for a place for Annie—that is, a situation as a domestic servant. Though she had said the skipper was to settle the vexed question, she had taken the management into her own hands. She did not for a moment dream that Annie, in the interval, might strike out a path for herself.

As she came along the headland from Eyemouth, she saw that, though the harbour was filling, the *Janet Rue* was not in. She felt no alarm, however, for it was a calm and sunny afternoon, with a soft, westerly wind scarcely ruffling the bosom of the sea.

She found the key where she had left it, and was surprised. What if, after all, she had been too hasty in her conclusion? What if Annie had been warmly welcomed at the Castle? What if, after all, she *should* become the young lady of St. Veda's? Would not that be turning the tables finely on her?

She even smiled grimly to herself at the possibility of it. The house was as she had left it, and the coal still smouldering in the kitchen grate. A fire 'gathered' by Janet Erskine never went out. In everything connected with her own domain she possessed unerring skill.

Annie had left no trace of her 'flitting,' not a thing was out of its place. Janet took off her bonnet and shawl, and changed her boots for her house shoes, and it was only when she went forward to break up the coal that she noticed the letter standing on the mantelpiece. She paused with the poker in her hand, and read the address, and a curious look came on her face. She broke up the fire into a ruddy blaze, hung the kettle on the swing; for, though she had had an early cup of tea with her kinswoman, she was ready for another after her four-mile walk.

Then she very calmly took down the letter, and opened it. What was meant for her husband's eyes of course could be no secret from hers; besides, her heart was sick with apprehension. A fear, almost like the fear of death, was upon her. If aught had happened to Annie, with what words should she answer the two who would be home before the gloaming? They would hold her responsible, she knew, and her son was quite aware that of late she had not felt and acted quite kindly towards Annie.

She sat down while she read it. Self-possessed though she was by nature, her limbs were shaking beneath her. She was actually afraid to read what Annie, with poor, trembling hand, had written for the eyes she loved. She read every word, and then let the letter fall on her lap and sat looking straight before her. The kettle came to the boil, and poured beautifully out on the polished steel fender, and sent a little stream of water underneath the hearthrug; but she never saw it. She was thinking of the letter. It had given her a terrible shock. The possibility of Annie leaving the house thus had never once occurred to her. She did not know that a

sensitive heart can only endure a certain amount, and, when that limit is reached, that action becomes prompt and decisive. Annie had borne as long and as much as she was able, and had then put an end to it. Janet Erskine was startled. In a moment she was brought face to face with her own conduct. Her heart was wrung with pain as she read the girl's pathetic words. There was not one syllable of reproach in the thing from beginning to end, and yet it cut Janet Erskine to the quick. She was entirely left out. Annie's absolute silence concerning her showed that her feeling must have been too strong for words. In that sharp hour all the old, sweet, beloved memories of her adopted child came thronging about Janet Erskine with cruel swiftness. She remembered only her sweet, dear ways, her ready helpfulness, her sunny heartedness, her willing obedience. She knew what she had lost, how much the child was to her now that she was gone. Had Annie come in at the door just then, everything must have been cleared up, for Janet Erskine would have gone down on her knees to her. At that moment there was nothing but remorse and self-reproach in her heart. But Annie at that very instant was standing at the carriage window, as the train was flying past Reston, vainly endeavouring to obtain a glimpse of the home she had voluntarily left behind.

Janet Erskine, as we know, feared the face of no man. She had never been accustomed to answer for her actions to any one but herself, but she shrank from the idea of her husband's home-coming. She wished the *Janet Rae* had been gone on a long cruise instead of being hourly expected into port. Ay, there she was; her brown sails filled with the soft wind, making direct for the Haven harbour. For the first time in all her married life, the sight of the returning boat was not welcome to Janet Erskine.

She had no time to plan how she would act or what she should say. Do not imagine that she fancied any action of hers required explanation or defence. She was perfectly

righteous in her own opinion. She was the injured, not the inflieter of injury. Annie had brought a scandal on their home, and for no reason but a silly girl's whim. So argued Janet Erskine with herself, as she set about getting a meal ready for her husband and son. She was absent-minded, however, for she set the empty kettle on the fire again and allowed it to sit there till the bottom was red-hot. Then she had to seek out another one, and go out to fill it at the spring. She shaded her eyes with her hand at the door, and looked along to the pier. The *Janet Rae* was anchored, and they were landing the spoil of the sea. She saw the glistening sheen of the herring shoals lying in the boat; evidently they had had a good trip. Other wives were wont to meet the boats; she never did, so that there was nothing unusual in her action that day. The two Erskines, however, wondered that Annie was not down. She it was who watched their outgoing and their incoming, and her welcome at the pier-head was never wanting, in fair weather or foul. She was absent that day for the first time.

Janet Erskine set out a substantial and tempting tea with methodical care. The incident of the kettle had recalled her scattered wits. She made no more mistakes. There was a hard-set expression on her face, and her mouth was grim in its righteous indignation and wrath.

The brief period of tender regret had passed; it was difficult to believe that it had ever existed. She knew there would be a curious scene presently, when she had the two men to face; possibly she was nerving herself for it.

It was seven o'clock, and the train bearing Annie with it had arrived in Edinburgh when the skipper and his son came over the shingly slope to the cottage.

'I wonder whaur Annie is? It's no' often we've to wait or we get to the hoose to get a sight o' her,' said the skipper.

'No; maybe she's awa' some gate,' Adam returned. He was hungering more than usual for a sight of Annie's face,

though he had quite relinquished all hope of ever calling her by the dear name of wife. Like his father, Adam Erskine was unselfish ; he would rejoice in the happiness of another, even at the expense of his own.

‘Hulloa, guidwife, here we are again! Hoo’s a’ wi’ ye?’ cried the skipper, in his loud, hearty way, as his stalwart form darkened the open door. ‘That looks hame-like, eh, Adam?’ he added, pointing to the table. ‘But whaur’s Annie?’

‘Annie isn’t in,’ Janet answered, with difficulty. ‘Are you wet? No; I see you are both quite dry. Come and have your teas. There’s plenty time to speak after.’

‘But where *is* Annie? Is she at the Castle?’ persisted the skipper.

‘She was there in the morning,’ Janet answered, and averted her face as she began to pour out the tea. ‘Draw in your chair, laddie, and take a meal. I’m sure you’re needing it.’

‘Ay, but whaur’s Annie?’ repeated Adam, for a vague feeling of uneasiness oppressed him. The question the third time repeated angered Janet Erskine, perhaps because it showed how dear Annie was to these two.

‘She’s away. I don’t know where,’ she said, turning her white face straight to her husband. ‘I went to Eyemouth to see Jean the day, and when I came back there’s what I found instead of Annie. Perhaps you’ll be able to make more of it than me.’

She took the letter from behind the tea-caddy on the mantelpiece, and held it out to her husband.

‘A letter! Wha is’t frae? But I haena my glesses,’ said the skipper wonderingly but not apprehensively.

You see he had not the least suspicion of the strange undercurrents which had been of late disturbing the even tide of life in his home.

‘Here, Adam, lad, read it oot. It’ll set ye better than me, ony way.’

He handed Adam the letter, and sat down on the arm of

his own chair to listen. And Adam Erskine read the letter from beginning to end in the same voice, amid a silence which had something terrible in it.

'What's the maitter wi' the bairn, an' what's com'd ower her?' said the skipper at length, and his voice shook. Instinctively he looked at his wife; so did Adam. They had left Annie in her care. She was quite ready for them, but she did not at once speak.

'What dis't mean ava?' repeated the skipper, in a dazed way. 'Janet, what gars ye no'speak? Ye ken a' aboot it, or should ken.'

'It's easy enough to know the meaning of it,' said Janet Erskine then, with a short, dry laugh, which was quite out of place. 'She's tired of our plain living, and she's away to better herself, if she can. There has never been any gratitude in her. Our plan is to forget her, and all we have done for her. That's all I have to say. Are ye coming to your teas?'

There was another silence. The skipper sat still on the arm of the chair, with his arms folded across his breast, and his eyes looking out of the open window to the sea. The wind stealing in played with the grey hairs straggling on his rugged brow.

He did not in the least comprehend the thing, and he was vainly trying to come to some understanding of it. He had left the bairn he loved so well in good spirits, and apparently happy—he had returned to find her gone.

The face of Adam Erskine the younger, however, underwent a change. It became dark with the passion of his feelings, and seemed to be all lined and seamed as if a plough had passed over it. He turned on his mother like a lion.

'It is you that has driven Annie awa' frae hame,' he thundered, and the skipper started to his feet in the greatness of his surprise. 'I've never haen a minute's peace lately for fear o' something like this.'

'Adam, that's no' a way to speak to yer mither,' quoth the skipper. 'My lad, ye're forgettin' yersel'. What for daur ye say yer mither drove Annie awa'?''

But Adam would not be still. He would have his say. In a moment of time he had jumped to the right conclusion. He knew his mother's relentless temper, and her wearing-out dwelling on one theme. He also knew—alas, too well!—the proud, sensitive soul of the dear girl he loved. Love had sharpened Adam's faculties, and given to his eyes a clearer vision.

'I will speak!' he continued, though in a less furious voice. 'I'm no' forgettin' what respect's due, but she canna say that I'm no' richt. She kens hoo lang she sat here wi' me, an' Annie lyin' wide waukin' in her bed, an' said things the lassie couldna forget. They were neither true nor kind. Ye'll maybe mind sayin' the same hoose couldna haud you an' Annie now. What could the bairn dae? If somebody had to gang, it maun be her. There was nae ither.'

The skipper passed his hand perplexedly across his brow, and looked from one to the other questioningly. There seemed to be a great deal he did not know. This was entirely a new revelation to him. He must know more in order to understand the thing aright.

'What for could the same hoose no' haud oor Annie an' you, guidwife, ony mair noo than then?' he asked, looking at his wife. 'She's as guid a bairn noo as ever she was. To me she seemed a thoosand times better. She was the very licht o' the hoose. What gar'd ye be sae ill at her, Janet, if ye were ill, as Adam says?'

But Janet Frskine turned her back, and spake never a word. She even lifted the full cup of tea to her lips, and took a mouthful, though it was like to choke her.

'She canna deny it,' said Adam the younger, and his voice shook also, for his heart was aching intolerably. 'Sin' ever Annie telt me honestly an' fairly, as ony true lassie wud, that she wadna mairry me, my mither fair turned against her. It's my blame. I say now, as I've said afore, I wish my tongue had been cutted oot afore I spoke o' mairryin'. But for a'

that, you had nae occasion to turn again' Annie,' he added, pointedly, to his mother. 'If onybody might feel sair it wud hae been me, an' I said naething. Oh, I ken brawly hoo it's been. Ye've herpit on a' we've dune for her, an' o' her black ingratitude, till the crater couldna staund it. May God forgi'e us a'.'

'Is this true, Janet?' asked the skipper. His voice was low and quiet, but his eye was stern and fixed, and seemed to command his wife's attention. She turned her head slowly, and looked him defiantly in the face. The crisis had come, and she was not going to stand in her own house and be brought to account for the sake of the girl who had left them. I wish you to notice that she had convinced herself that Annie was base, ungrateful, and indifferent. She attached no blame to herself. She was honest, according to her light; but it was a narrow, prejudiced light, which required the spirit of charity to broaden it.

'It is true what he says,' she made answer quietly. 'I said she was ungrateful and undeserving, that she had made a poor return for all we have done for her; and I say it again. I am glad she has gone away; the same house could *not* have held her and me any longer. I went to Jean's this very day to see about getting a place for her.'

'Then ye took a fell lot upon ye, my woman,' said the skipper, in a voice such as Janet had never heard before. The lion in him was roused. He loved Annie with a great love; to him she seemed dearer at that moment than either wife or son. She had entwined herself about his heart with her sweet ways and her constant and willing service; her bright, winsome, happy-heartedness had been the very sunshine of his life. And out of his knowledge, when he was absent or unobservant, they had poisoned the mainspring of the girl's sweet young life, till there was no alternative left but the one she had chosen. He did not understand it all, but a glimpse is sometimes sufficient. He reached out his

hand for the letter, and, putting on his spectacles, read it through again.

'If she were here this mornin' she canna be that far awa' but what we can get her yet,' he said presently. 'Adam, my lad, get ye ready. Ye'll gang yin road, an' I'll gang anither. I'll no' sleep this nicht or I ken mair than I ken i the noo. Ye can tak' up yer dishes, Janet, my woman. I dinna break bread i' the hoose or I get at the bottom o' this. She was at the Castle i' the mornin', did ye say?'

'Ay, an' if the young Laird is not at home ye'll better seek them both the one road,' said Janet, with a pointed, significant scorn.

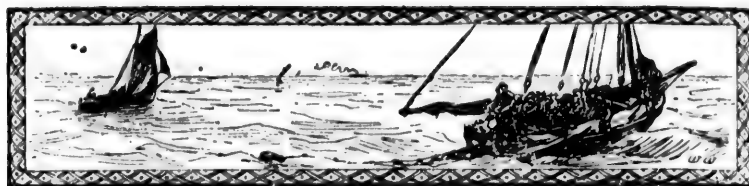
Up rose the cords on Adam Erskine the younger's brow, till they stood out like knotted cords.

'May God forgive ye for that lee,' he said hoarsely. 'Can ye no' be content wi' what ye hae dune already? Dinna mak' yer wark ony blacker than it is.'

Adam had forgotten where respect was due indeed, and lest he should say more he hastily turned about, and went out by the open door. His father followed him, but he took the back way, and walked up the garden path to the little gate in the wall. His heart was like to break. His anger, never long-enduring, had vanished, and only the bitterness of his loss remained. The glory of the sunset was on sea and land, and the pale roses at the gate, which Annie had touched with loving fingers a few hours before, were blushing under the sun's parting kiss.

But for the skipper a deep, dark cloud as of the night had settled down on his life. He folded his arms on the dyke, and laid his grey head above them. The wind played with the 'love locks,' as Annie called the waving masses at his temples. The old man was overcome with his grief. A great sob shook him from head to foot.

'Oh, my lammie!' he said brokenly, and the tears streamed down his rugged face like rain.



CHAPTER XVI.

MORE LIGHT.

THE skipper did not long remain inactive. In a few minutes he re-entered the house and began to divest himself of his rough seafaring clothes. His wife watched him silently, sullenly even, but he paid her no heed until he was dressed.

‘I’m gaun up to the Castle,’ he said then, just as he was leaving the house. ‘I maun be at the bottom o’ this afore I sleep. What did ye mean, Janet, by sayin’ that we might seek Annie an’ the young Laird the same gate?’

‘Ye may ask what ye like. I’ll say no more about her good or bad, Adam Erskine, my man,’ replied Janet stiffly.

‘But, Janet, ye maun speak. It’s only you that can throw ony light on the business. Div ye no’ care, my ’ooman, what comes ower the crater? She’s oor bairn, Janet; we took the responsibility o’ her upbringing’ upo’ oorsel’s efter the wrack. We’ll hae to answer for her welfare. I canna understand this ava’. I thocht ye liket Annie as weel’s I did.’

‘I liked her weel enough; it is only men folk who worship common clay, as you an’ Adam have done. But I saw her faults. They have grown on her of late. She’s filled with vanity and conceit. She was by St. Abb’s last night wi’ young Archie till after darkenin’, an’ when I rebuked her, she

stood up quite impudent-like before me. He said he intended to marry her. They sent for her to the Castle the day, but what was said or done there I can't tell. They've not been so keen about her as she imagined, or she would never have left. That's the story, and I hope it's to your liking. But don't say her name to me again. I'm sick of the sound of it.'

Adam Erskine sighed, and, putting Annie's letter carefully in his breast pocket, trudged out of the house. He was vexed and wearied in spirit, for he was a man of peace; and never in all the years he had had a home had there been such a strife in it. It grieved him to blame his wife, whom he truly loved; but he was a just man, and the whole thing was clear as noon-day to him. He knew Janet's faults as well as her virtues, and he saw that her jealousy and her selfishness had carried her to an extreme. He also had desired to see the two bairns he loved set up in a happy home of their own, and had hoped to see his grandchildren about his knees before he should take his last voyage; but, since Annie's heart was not with their planning, he had given up his long-cherished hope cheerfully, though not without a pang of regret. The idea of blaming Annie, or of seeking to coerce her into the path they had mapped out for her, had never once presented itself to his mind, and he felt very sore that Janet, a good woman in the main, should have committed such a grave mistake. 'Weemin's queer,' he said to himself as he went slowly up the School Brae. 'Ay, it's true that naeboddy but the Lord that made them can understand them. They're ower kittle for human understandin'.' Not far past the school he met John Robertson, the farmer, from Temple Hall, driving in his gig. They were old friends, and it was natural that the farmer should draw rein for a word of talk.

'Guid e'en, skipper. I saw your boat had gotten in again. Man, I'm seekin' hairst folk. The whole thing cam' upo' us like a clap o' thunder, as I said to Annie the day. Ye be a' weel doon by?'

'A' weel. Did ye see Annie the day, John?' asked the skipper, with a painful eagerness.

'Annie? ay. I met her on her way to the train, an' gied her a lounderin' for no' settin' up wird for Jock to bring the pownie. We're hand idle, ony way; but, faith, there'll be steer, an' muckle o'd the morn', an' for a month to come. I dinna think, skipper, ye're unco weel like yerseel'. Onything botherin' ye?'

'What time did ye see Annie?'

'On the back o' three, up near The Priory, fleein' to catch the four train.'

'Fower, that wad be the fower for Berwick. Whaur are ye gaun the noo, John?'

'Deed, I hardly ken. I'm seekin' folk. Ye'll no' ken o' ony that wad hire for the hairst?'

'No, I dinna. Will ye drive me up to Reston, John, jist i' the noo?'

'Ay, but what for?'

'Let me up, an' I'll tell ye,' said the skipper, and with a bound he was up beside the farmer.

'There's been a bit dryness an' temper i' the hoose the noo. Weemen are queer, ye ken, an' Janet, the wife, maybe expects ower muckle o' a young crater, so Annie's taen't to heart an' gaen aff. Ye'll no' ask me mair, John, i' the meantime. Man, if onything comes ower the iassie I kenna what I'll dae. She's as dear as she were my ain.'

'Mercy me!'

Sore dumbfounded was John Robertson by this piece of news.

'I thoct there was something by ordinar' about it a' this efternune—faith did I—for you folk dinna traivel muckle, nee mair nor oorsel's. Bless me, skipper, Annie awa'! That's unco news.'

'Ay is't, John, unco news,' said the skipper, and his friend saw his lip quiver.

'I'm no' feared that the bairn, whaurever she may gang, winna keep the straicht road,' said the skipper presently, and flung up his head a little proudly. 'There never was a better bairn, an' she has the fear o' God in her heart. But when I think on the crater awa'—guid kens whaur—I'm no' fit to bear it, John. She canna fecht nor fend for hersel'. She's ane o' the folk that should be cared for. We hinna cared eneuch for her, I doot.'

'She'll no' gang faur, skipper, never fear,' said the farmer cheerily, for he saw how his friend was moved. 'She'll no' bide lang awa' frae you, lad. The very grund ye walk on's dear till her. She says ye've been ten faithers till her an' mair. I houp, hooever, that she'll come back afore the folk ken. Orr's Haven's aye been a clashin' hole, an' it's no' gude for a young lassie's name to be gaun frae mouth to mouth.'

To Adam Erskine that seemed the very least of the trouble. If Annie were only home again the tittle-tattle of the village would be of little moment to him. And so he said.

'Had she ony siller wi' her?' asked John Robertson, after a bit, as they were driving through Coldingham village.

'Ay, she has a wheen bawbees. Her luck-pennies an' her New Year half-crowns gethered thegither. She'll no' ken want for a wee, an' she said in her letter that she'll never be in ony trouble or want withoot lettin' me ken,' said the skipper absently. 'She said it, and the bairn never leed.'

'She left a letter then?' said John Robertson, with interest. 'That's what a' the young leddies oor Kate reads about in the London journals dae. Stop or Annie comes hame, if I dinna torment her about a' this.'

The skipper smiled a melancholy smile, and then a silence fell upon them as they drove rapidly along the dusty road. The farmer saw his friend was not inclined for talk, and so left him in peace, and was soon absorbed in calculations as to the forward state of his neighbours' fields for the harvest.

It was getting dark when they drove up to Reston Station,

and before the pony stopped the skipper had jumped out. He knew the stationmaster well, and went straight to the booking-office to seek him.

'Ye wad see my lassie gaing aff with the fower train this afternoon,' he said, after a brief salutation had passed between them. 'Did she tak' a ticket for Berwick, or whaur?'

'I'll ask George; he's the ticket man,' said the stationmaster readily, and went off to seek the office boy.

'Ay, she took a ticket for Berwick, he says,' was the reply when he returned in a few minutes. 'She had some luggage with her, but she took it in the carriage with her. Nothing wrong I hope?'

'Oh, no' muckle: only a lassie's whummleerie,' said the skipper, with a faint smile, and hurried away, afraid to be asked any more questions. He had learned all he wanted to know.

'I'll drive ye on to Berwick if ye like, skipper,' said the sympathetic farmer, when he heard the news. 'Mag's as fresh as paint, and we'll hae the hairst mune for company there an' back.'

The skipper shook his head. 'It wad be a fule's errant, John, though I thank ye kindly. Naebody kens Annie at Berwick, an' to seek for a country lassie at sic a big station wad be lookin' for a needle in a stack. What I houp is that she hasna gaen ower the Border. As long as she keeps on this side she'll no' come to muckle ill.'

So in silence once more they drove over the hill to Coldingham.

'Ye needna come by the Ha' gates, John,' said the skipper, as they neared home. 'I'll sune dauner doon, and I've a ca' to mak ony way on the road.'

'It's nae trouble, skipper. I'll drive ye whaur ye like. It's a' I can dae, man, to help ye.'

'Thank ye kindly, again, John; but I'll no' bother ye the nicht. I'm satisfied on ae point; an' we ken she gaed to

Berwick any way. The morn I'll tak a langer journey. Ye'll no' say muckle about this, John, in the meantime.'

'No' me. I'll no' tell a leevin' soul, bar Kate. Faith, she'll greet her een oot about Annie; she's that set upon her. Keep up yer heart, skipper. She'll no' bide lang awa'.'

'I houp no'. Gude-nicht; my respects to the mistress.'

So saying, the skipper alighted from the gig, and trudged away down the slope to the Haven.

Gloaming had given place to the sweet darkness of the autumn night, and the harvest moon was just visible on the rim of a silvery-edged cloud; a few stars twinkled here and there among the night shadows; the sky was breaking up, and within an hour would be gloriously clear. The skipper felt the air sultry. He took off his cap, and wiped his brow with his blue cotton handkerchief. Then he walked on, keeping his cap under his arm, and allowing the soft night wind to fan his brow. He had never felt so unhappy and depressed in his life—a great, dark shadow seemed to lie coldly on his heart.

The night had fallen, and where was Annie—the sweet child he had so long sheltered in his home? If she were alone in a great city, she would be alone indeed, and amid many perils. He raised his eyes to the brightening sky, and though his lips did not move, that upward look was a deep-breathed, earnest prayer. Oh, the Lord who loved the children and the pure in heart would watch over his Annie wherever she might be! While it was his duty to seek her far and near, he need not causelessly torture himself so long as there was a heaven above him, the dwelling-place of a merciful and all-seeing God. He was a grand old man, this rude fisherman. Devoid of book-learning or outward culture, he had a heart a king might have envied. He lived very near to Nature's heart, the noble music of the sea had filled his being, he was incapable of an ignoble thought. And above and beyond all, his faith in the Creator, of whose grand handiwork he was a constant witness,

was absolute and unassailable. So he was sustained in this heavy trial which had come upon him. Just as he stepped within the passenger gateway at St. Veda's, the moon shone forth gloriously, and made a mystery of light and dark shadow among the tall trees in the avenue. Nine o'clock was ringing from the stable tower when he approached the Castle door.

Like Annie, it came natural to him to seek the front entrance, especially to-night when his business was entirely with the Laird's folk.

'Is the Laird in, my woman?' he said to the smart Isabella who answered his ring.

'No, Captain Erskine; he is in London, and so is Mr. Archie.'

'Oh, are they?'

He was puzzled for a moment how to act.

'Her ladyship is in the drawing-room, Captain Erskine. Will you see her?'

'Is she? I'll see her ladyship then, my lass, if ye'll be guid enough to tell her I'm waitin' her pleasure. Tell her it's important business.'

'Very well, come in.'

She showed him into the gun-room, turned up the gas, and went up to her mistress. In less than three minutes she was back.

'You are to come to the drawing-room, Lady Grant says.'

'Very weel, my lassie,' answered the Captain, and obediently followed her upstairs. He was conscious of the soft carpet on which he was treading, of the subdued and lovely lights about him, of the vague, sweet perfume of many plants; but he observed no separate object, his mind being too much occupied by one thing.

'Good evening, Captain. Come away,' said the sweet voice of Lady Grant the moment he crossed the threshold of the drawing-room. She came forward a little to meet him, her silk robes making a rustling as she moved. There was a little nervous anxiety in her manner; she wondered whether this

interview would relate to what had passed between Annie and her in the morning.

'I hope there is nothing wrong. It is usually in stormy times you seek Sir Archie.'

'It's stormy enough the nicht, my leddy, an' I'm in a sairer trouble than ony the sea ever made,' answered the Captain, as he stood with his grey head uncovered before the Laird's wife. 'Oor bairn, Annie, has gane awa', my leddy, an', kennin' she was here in the mornin', I made bold to come up and spier whether you could throw ony licht on the thing, for I canna richtly understand it.'

Lady Grant began to breathe so violently that she had to lean against a table for support.

'Annie away! Oh, impossible, Captain Erskine,' she gasped faintly, for a terrible fear struck her chilly to the heart.

'It's ower true, my leddy. She gaed to Berwick by the fower-fifteen train; but whaur efter that only the Lord kens. What was she up here this mornin' for, an' did she say onything that could in ony way explain what she's dune?'

Lady Grant hesitated a moment, but only a moment. What she had said to Annie Erskine that morning had been the fruit of a settled conviction, and was kindly meant. She would be true to the old man questioning her so earnestly. She would keep nothing back.

'If you will sit down, Captain Erskine, I'll tell you all I know. It may, and it may not help you,' she said very gently and kindly. 'Do sit down; you look quite haggard and worn.'

To please her, the skipper took the chair to which she pointed, but he sat on the extreme edge of it, being too restless and ill at ease to be comfortable.

'I don't suppose you can be aware that no later than last night my son Archie asked Annie to be his wife?' began Lady Grant, but she was interrupted by an exclamation of surprise from the skipper,—

'His wife! Oor Annie! Maister Archie!' he said a little incoherently, for he could scarcely comprehend it.

'Yes,' said her ladyship, with a sorrowful shake of her head. 'It had come to that between them, out of all our knowledge, Captain. I see it is as great a surprise to you as it was to me last night.'

The skipper sat in silence a moment, looking to the ground. There was deep, unfeigned surprise in his heart, but also a feeling of satisfaction that the young Laird should have thought her so worthy of the highest honour he could give.

'That's news; news indeed, my leddy,' he said at length, a little anxiously. 'An' what mair? Annie was up here this mornin'. Was it about that?'

'It was. My son came to me last night immediately after he had parted with Annie, and told me what had passed. However foolish the boy is, he is true to the honour of his race, Captain,' said Lady Grant, with all a mother's pride. 'A message had just come from his father, asking him to come to London at once by the night mail. The business seems very urgent, though I cannot understand it. He would not go until I would promise to see Annie, or bring her up here. From what he said, I gathered that she has not been very happy of late with your wife.'

'So it seems, so it seems, my leddy, though I dinna ken what way sic a thing could be,' said the skipper very sorrowfully. 'Ye sent for Annie, then; an' what cam' o't?'

Lady Grant waited a moment or two before she replied.

'I do not know hōw to explain myself, Captain. It is so difficult and delicate a matter to deal with,' she said slowly. 'I sent for Annie, and we had a long talk. She is very dear to me, and, as I said to her, we could wish no sweeter wife for our son, but there are other drawbacks. Annie is very innocent; she knows nothing of the world. You will understand me more readily than she did.'

'Ay, my leddy, I understand. Ye wull believe that could

I hae preventit this it wad hae been preventit. Cottage and castle are best ilk ane in their ain bit. There has been ower muckle rinnin' back an' fore; but I never took a thocht. An' what did ye say till Annie?'

'I laid the whole thing before her. I explained to her what in all probability would be my son's career, and what part his wife would be expected to take in it. She had not thought of it at all, but she understood quite well. I left her quite free to choose. I said I would be pleased either way, and she has chosen. But oh, Captain, had I thought for a moment that she would leave you and the Haven, I should have kept her at any cost! But I did it for the best.'

'Div I no' ken, my leddy, ye are a' that is guid, an' hae ever been? It's hard to thole that them ye've been sae guid till should be the anes to vex your heart. I see hoo it a' is; it's as clear as day. Annie, puir lassie, kent that gin he cam' back she wad be torn atween twa fires, as it were. She thocht she wadna hae strength, an' so she's gane awa'. I aye lo'ed my lassie, but she's ten times dearer now, for she has a brave heart, an' she'll raither thole than dae what's wrang. Oh, if I but kent whaur she's to lay her heid doon this nicht, my leddy, I wad bless the Lord for His mercy an' His love!'

'But we will find her; we must find her, Captain. Archie will be like a lion when he comes home. *He* will leave no stone unturned; and if she comes back to be the future Lady Grant, we must just be glad that she is so worthy of it. I wish now I had said less this morning, but I did it for the best.'

'Ay, ay, brawly div I ken that. Weel, I'll awa' doon. I understaun' the thing noo, an' I'm gled I cam' up. I'll gang nae mair to the sea or I ken whaur my bairn is. I'll maybe no' bring her back after I find her, but she maun ken that I never lo'ed her as I dae noo. Weel, my leddy, I'll be gangin'. Guid-nicht wi' ye, an' mony thanks.'

The skipper's heart was lighter as he sought his home, and

it glowed with a new pride in his bairn. He loved her for her noble, self-sacrificing spirit ; there was that in it which touched his whole being.

To think that she had been so near winning so great a prize, and for conscience' sake she had put it away from her. It showed a noble resolve ; and even though he should grow sick with hope deferred in his search for her, he would neither despair nor fear. Wherever she went Annie would do well, and carve out a good way for herself.



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CHAPTER XVII.

THE LITTLE SISTERS.



H, dear me, Phemie Seton, it's an impossibility for me to do another hand's turn this day. We're growing old, and it's no use trying to do what we haven't strength for.' With these breathless words Miss Janet sank into a chair, and fanned her hot, old face with a feather duster, with which she had been sweeping down the lobby walls.

'I've been on my feet, Phemie Seton, since twenty minutes to seven this morning. Why will milk children, I wonder, come in the middle of the night; and there's a lot to do yet. It's not in gentlewomen to do a servant's work, Phemie, and I think it was a mistake putting away Elizabeth Ann Jackson.'

'You didn't think that, Janet, when you met her in the Meadow Walk in your best brocade, and when she ate a pound of butter, at eighteenpence a pound, in the week,' said Miss Euphemia with a sly, little smile, as she carefully mixed the paint on the palette, preparatory to putting the finishing touches to a study of autumn flowers, at which she had been working all morning.

'Well, well, Phemie Seton, you grumbled about the matter yourself, though you're not a housewife, and will never be, do what you like. Why, *we* don't eat half a pound between us.

It's my belief Elizabeth Ann Jackson fed the policeman and the scavenger from her cupboard. And to see her turn up her nose at sheep's-head broth—made as we tasted it at Lady Grizel Fraser's table—made one wonder a judgment didn't fall on her,' continued Miss Janet wrathfully, as she dangled her little feet to and fro with an energy which did not give evidence of weary limbs. It was a very high chair and very straight-backed, and Miss Janet was a very short, slender person under five feet. Both the sisters were under-sized, and so quaint and old-world in their appearance, that it was the custom for ribald and uncourteous young people to laugh and stare at them in the street. They belonged to a bygone age, and had not advanced with the times; they were, beyond a doubt, old-fashioned in all their ways and customs, as well as in their appearance, but they were true gentlewomen, and their hearts were as good as gold. They belonged to a good old Edinburgh professional family, and had their own strong family pride, though they were very poor,—so poor, indeed, that but for Miss Janet's diplomacy they had scarcely had bread to eat. She was the practical member of the family, though some of their relatives were fond of saying there wasn't a head between them. Miss Seton, or Miss Phemie, as she was called, was a dreamer and a castle-builder, as full of romance as a three-volume novel. She was not without accomplishments. She could play old-fashioned airs on the piano, and accompany herself in the old ballads she had heard her mother sing, and she believed she had a genius for painting. That was a sore subject between the sisters, for Miss Janet grudged the money required for painting materials. In spite of Miss Phemie's belief in her own powers, she had never been able to dispose even of one specimen of her art. Sometimes, when funds were low and care pinching Miss Janet's housewifely heart, she would give vent to a little outburst, and reproach her sister for her waste of time and means. Fine needle or lace work, she would say at such times, might

find a market and bring in a little to increase the household store. Miss Phemie listened in much silence to these periodical tirades, but continued at the labour she loved. In the main, however, the twain lived together in amity and peace. The house they occupied was a good one, and their own unburdened property. It was a commodious flat in Northumberland Street, which still retains a certain flavour of its bygone selectness and gentility.

This house, with a small annuity of fifty-two pounds, had been all that Gavin Seton, the solicitor, had been able to leave his young widow and three daughters at his untimely death. Mrs. Seton made a brave struggle for existence. Swallowing her pride and prejudice for her children's sake, she took boarders into her house, and with the proceeds liberally educated her children. Her boarders were mostly gentlemen studying at, or connected with, the University, and she seldom made any change. Those who were privileged to become Mrs. Seton's boarders found in her house a home. As her daughters grew up, however, Mrs. Seton began to feel that it was not quite prudent to have young men in the house coming in contact with three pretty young girls. Her relatives came down upon her in a body, and represented how highly imprudent the system was, but not one of them (though all were in affluent circumstances) offered any substantial solution of the difficulty. There were three healthy young women to be clothed and fed, and owing to their birth and connections it was out of the question for them to seek to make their own living. Without the boarders the question of existence became a problem Mrs. Seton could not solve, so she continued her course, while doing her utmost to warn her daughters, and keep them entirely out of the way. But that was not easy. They were young, and they liked a frolic. Then it was not to be supposed that the boarders themselves would or could be indifferent to the young ladies. So, though they were very douce and well brought up young women, mild

flirtations did arise; bright eyes watched the outgoings and incomings of the boarders, and so things went on until a thunderbolt fell on the widow's household.

The youngest daughter, Annie, her namesake, the pride and pet of the flock, went off one fine day with the youngest boarder, the baronet's son from the East Coast—the young man who had specially won Mrs. Seton's heart, and whose praises she was never weary of sounding.

He took away her darling, and though he made her his wife at once, his people refused to recognise her, and the affair made a complete breach between him and his father, which resulted in his sailing for India with his girl wife. Then Mrs. Seton dismissed all her boarders, and began a life of austere rule and rigid economy for the remaining two. Smarting under a sense of the wrong done her, the mother made home a kind of prison for her other daughters. In a sense the innocent were made to suffer for the guilty. As was to be expected, Mrs. Seton's relatives visited her with a great deal of censure. Advice is so cheap, and it is so pleasant to heap blame on the head of the offender who has suffered through not paying due attention to that advice. So the well-to-do and very proper relatives crowded over the indiscreet and poor one, and said it served her right for so far forgetting herself as to let her rooms to strangers. Who ever heard of a lady connected, even remotely, with the Setons lowering herself in such a way? Ah, me! so the world's tongue wags, and gives blame where only sympathy is meet. Mrs. Seton bore her trouble in silence, and not without a certain dignity, which made her sharp-tongued relatives hold themselves rather aloof. She wished neither their pity, their advice, nor their blame, she said to Mrs. Christopher Seton, the advocate's wife, who lived in Heriot Row, and drove an awe-inspiring equipage. She only wished to be left alone, to live her life as she chose, and to attend to her own little affairs. After such plain speaking what could Mrs. Christopher

do but flounce out of the house in high dudgeon, and wash her hands of her poor relations? So the roan horses, the yellow carriage, and the purple livery came no more to Northumberland Street. But though Mrs. Seton thus proudly bore her trouble, she never recovered from it, and from that time her health failed. No doubt she fretted after the bairn who had gone, with all the trust of love, away to the far shores of India, but she never willingly spoke her name, and the girls were forbidden to do it. Within two years she died, and the two sisters were left, young women made old before their time by carking care and the narrowness of their lives, to continue the same morotonous round of existence. And so it went on year by year; time advanced, but they stayed behind, in the world, but not of it, a simple-minded curious pair, who had a past girlhood to live upon, but no present or future. They had no hope of any new day bringing to them any special brightness; their chief and only care was to make their meagre annuity provide food for themselves and their little maid; their most exciting interest turning their old gowns and trimming their ancient bonnets; and so we find them when their turn has come to take a part in this history.

Whether it was that food had become dearer, or domestic servants more extravagant and more difficult to keep, I cannot say; but after her experience of Elizabeth Ann Jackson, Miss Janet had found it impossible to keep the household expenses within the prescribed limit, and had therefore dispensed with that improvident damsel's services. Since the May term (it was now August) the two ladies had been servantless, but Miss Janet was growing tired of the drudgery. It did not come naturally to her. She had no method, but did her work by fits and starts, and in very curious ways. Sometimes the house was a sight to see, for Miss Janet, being erratic in her movements, sometimes took it in her head to go for a promenade in Princes Street at the fashionable hour,

and would leave whatever she was at, attire herself in her best brocade and newest trimmed bonnet, and set off. Miss Phemie was utterly useless in the house, and entirely at her sister's mercy. So their existence was one of extreme curiosity and uncertainty.

'Yes, I'm sick to death of this drudgery, and I'm going to get another serving woman at once, Phemie Seton. I'm wondering whether we couldn't get a girl from that orphanage Mrs. Christopher Seton patronises. I've a mind to go round to Heriot Row this morning.'

'And have these ill-bred children of our cousin's laughing at you, Janet, as they did the last time we called,' said Miss Phemie. 'You will need to go yourself, sister, for I cannot bear to see children so ill-mannered to their elders.'

'Oh, poor things, they know no better. How can they have any manners with such a silly, empty mother? Just a peacock, Phemie Seton, just a peacock,' said Miss Janet with good-natured scorn. 'Well, it's a fine morning, and I'll go and get dressed in my blue brocade. Are ye not coming out, Phemie?'

Miss Phemie laid down her brush and looked, not without longing, out of the window up to the strip of bright blue sky visible above the narrow street. Her eyes ached with stooping over her easel, and she was tired for once of her work.

'Well, I will, Janet; the gardens will be beautiful to-day; and while you go to Mrs. Christopher's, I'll ask for the blind girl in Howe Street.'

So the pair attired themselves in their rich but old-fashioned garb, took their velvet reticules, their silk parasols, and sallied forth as happy as children to enjoy the sunshine and the gay shop windows. They never had a penny to spend, poor ladies, to buy themselves anything new; but they could look at all the pretty things with eyes which had neither envy nor jealousy in them. They were even thankful that they were

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secure from want, and that they had a good roof over them ; then they were Setons, and was not that in itself a great deal to be proud of? For the brand-new people who lived in the suburbs and drove in gay carriages, Miss Phemie and Miss Janet had a mild contempt. The best families still clung with loving affection to the north side of the town.

It was about one o'clock when, tired out with their promenade, the two ladies came to the gardens, and, seeking out a shady seat, sat down to enjoy the rest, and the rice biscuits of which they made their frugal luncheon.

Had Mrs. Christopher Seton happened to drive past in her carriage, and observed her kinswomen thus occupied, doubtless she would have been appropriately horrified ; but, as was to be expected, the rich Setons were all out of town for the season. Not one of the connection, and it had many branches, ever invited the two lonely maiden sisters to their country places for a change of air and scene, and the two had ceased to expect it. Had the invitation come, it is probable they would have preferred remaining at home, where they were at least secure from ridicule and contempt.

'Do you know, Phemie Seton, I have been thinking a great deal about Annie all day, and I have dreamed about her three nights running, and always saw her in a ship on the sea. Have you seen the old dream book lying about lately? I must see what a ship on water means.'

'Now that's strange, sister, for I have been troubled about Annie, too. Do you ever think about her, Janet, with little children about her knees, our nieces and nephews, Janet? It is a very pleasant thing to think of.'

There were tears in Miss Phemie's eyes, and a sweet, tender smile played about her mouth.

'Oh, she'll be sure to have a lot of boys and girls wherever she is, and I only hope she has money to spend on their meat and clothes,' said Miss Janet regretfully. 'I can't fancy our Annie worried and held down like the mothers of big families

in our district. She liked dainty things: I hope he was able to give her them. It's like a dream looking back.'

'Ay, it is,' said Miss Phemie, and her sweet old face was still flushed, thinking of that past romance which had changed all their lives. 'Janet, do you never think our mother was very hard on them, and on Annie especially? He was so worthy to be loved, and nobody could help liking Annie. It was the most natural thing in the world they should do it.'

'Maybe; but mother was quite right to be angry about the secret marriage. Hidden things are not often right,' said Miss Janet severely. 'Not but what I think *he* was a well-like young man. I have never seen a handsomer. They were a bonnie pair. Eh, me! I wonder where they are now?'

'The Lord knows. I don't suppose we shall ever see our Annie this side the grave,' said Miss Phemie softly. 'Let us go out of the sun again, Janet. It has come round to us. My eyes are sore this morning.'

'I don't wonder at that,' said Miss Janet bluntly. 'But it'll fade our gowns anyway.'

So they rose and moved farther into the shadow of the trees. The gardens were full of nursemaids and children, and of visitors to the city, enjoying its beauties to the full that lovely morning.

Just as the ladies sat down in a shady nook, a young girl came up to them, and with a certain shyness and sweetness of manner held out the velvet reticule Miss Phemie had left on the other seat.

'Please, you left your bag. May I give it you?' she said; and both the sisters gave a great start, for the voice was so familiar that it seemed to them like a voice from the grave, or an echo from that far-off and happy past, when they were young and light of heart, and life, full of boundless and beautiful possibilities, was all before them.



CHAPTER XVIII.

KIND HEARTS.

THEY recovered themselves in a little, however, and looked with keen interest at the young girl who stood before them. She did not look more than nineteen or twenty, and her face had all the winsomeness of youth and girlish beauty.

But there was a sadness in her expression, a pathetic curve about her sweet mouth, and a shadow under the eyes, which touched the warm hearts of the little ladies at once. They did not know quite what to make of her; she was well and tastefully dressed, her shoes were dainty and neat, but her hands were bare, and neither white nor fine. Yet she spoke like a lady, and her manner had a quiet grace.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said Miss Phemie, with a little old-fashioned curtsy. ‘It was very stupid of me to leave my bag. But my sister and I were talking, and I forgot.’

‘It was no trouble to bring it,’ said the young girl, with a slight smile as she turned away.

‘It was very kind, my dear. Good morning. Isn’t it a fine morning?’ said Miss Janet in her cheerful fashion. Then the sisters went back to their seat, and the young stranger walked away, slowly, and with a slightly listless step, as if she had no particular end in view.

‘That’s a nice young person now, Phemie Seton,’ said Miss

Janet. 'Did you notice her manner? How respectful, and yet how charming! What would you think she is?'

'I can't tell, Janet. She reminded me very much of—of —somebody I have seen,' said Miss Phemie, with her eyes down, and beginning to trace a pattern on the gravel with her parasol.

'Now, I just thought the same thing. I wish now I had asked her name,' said Miss Janet musingly.

'Well, she is not very far away. See, she has gone to sit down in the other walk,' said Miss Phemie eagerly. 'Look at her sad expression, Janet. She looks as if she had a heart sorrow, and yet she is so young.'

'Fretting after a sweetheart, likely,' said Miss Janet brusquely. 'Suppose you go up and ask her to sit by us a little. If I go, I'll frighten her. You say my manner is not kind.'

Miss Phemie rose at once, her face glowing with kindness. The look on the young stranger's face had won her heart. She came up to her suddenly, for the girl seemed to be sitting in a deep reverie, and Miss Phemie detected a tear on the rounded cheek.

'Excuse me, my dear, but my sister says, would you come and sit by us a little?' she said in her eager way; 'we are having a little talk, and we think you look troubled. Come away, my dear.'

The young girl rose at once, and a flush of gratitude overspread her sweet face. The kindness simply offered was simply accepted, and in a few minutes there were three on the shady seat instead of two; and they were talking with the familiarity of old friends, at least the two little ladies talked and the stranger listened, only answering when she was asked a direct question.

All the while Miss Janet watched her with her keen, shrewd eye, and wondered about her, and what brought her there alone.

'Do you live in Edinburgh, my dear?' she asked presently, determined to find out something about her if possible.

'No, but I expect to live in Edinburgh now,' she answered quietly.

'With your father and mother?'

'No; I have none.'

'Oh, my dear, that is sad. Have you any aunts and uncles in town, then?'

'No; I have none.'

'That is very sad, my dear,' repeated Miss Phemie sympathetically.

'As to that, Phemie Seton, I don't know,' said Miss Janet brusquely; 'it is far sadder, I think, to have aunts and uncles like ours, who think they have the right to meddle with their poor nieces without helping them. Our young friend is perhaps far better off without them.'

'Perhaps; I didn't think of that,' assented Miss Phemie meekly.

'Would you think it very curious of us, my dear, to inquire your name?' asked Miss Janet presently. 'It is rather awkward to have to call you our young friend, isn't it?'

'My name, ma'am, is Annie Erskine,' said the young girl without hesitation, though they saw her lip quiver.

'And you are an orphan?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Don't think us still more curious. We would like to befriend you, my dear. We are orphans ourselves, and nobody ever thinks anything about us. We have a great many relations, quite too many, still we befriend ourselves; but do tell us if you have any trouble, and what is grieving you,' said Miss Janet, with a quiet sympathy which quite amazed Miss Phemie, and made her look at her sister with most unbounded admiration.

'I was wondering, just when the lady come up to me,' said

Annie Erskine in a low voice, 'whether there could be in this big city any one to help me.'

'Why, of course, there are hundreds, thousands,' said Miss Janet quietly. 'Bless me, my dear, every other person you meet has a kind heart, in spite of the aunts and uncles. Most people will do a kind action if they only knew how. But, my dear, tell us precisely what kind of help you need; of course,' she added, with an expressive glance at the young girl's neat attire, 'you do not need either food or clothing.'

'No,' said Annie, with a slight sigh; 'and I have a little money. What I want is something to do.'

'A very good thing. "Satan finds," as Dr. Watts says,' quoth Miss Janet, without giving herself time to give the quotation in full. 'It is a healthy sign when a young person is really anxious to work. But what kind of work would you do?'

'If I only knew any one who would take me as a servant. I can work with my hands, because I have been taught. I am very strong and very willing. There is nothing I would not do to repay any one who would give me a home in return.'

The two sisters looked at each other for a moment, but neither spoke. Miss Phemie, who was not discreet nor far-seeing, and who had instantly fallen in love with the romantic young stranger, would have invited her to Northumberland Street there and then; but Miss Janet, behind Annie Erskine's back, kept her in check by a warning forefinger. She was not less interested in the girl, however, herself.

'Have you ever, my dear, been in service before?'

'No, I have not.'

'Ah, then, you cannot be expected to know that there is a certain form to be gone through. References as to—to—suitability' (Miss Janet hesitated between the word she used and the word 'character,' that other bugbear between mistress and maid) 'are usually asked.'

'So they told me.'

'Who?'

'At the register where I inquired yesterday,' said Annie Erskine. 'They told me it was useless to try to obtain a situation of any kind without references from my past employer.'

'That is so,' nodded Miss Janet. 'And, of course, as you have never been in service before, you had none to give. Where did you come from? Is there nobody to say a helpful word for you?'

'No,' said Annie quickly, and a look of indescribable pain, which was not lost upon the little ladies, crossed her face. Both had now become intensely interested.

'And where are you staying just now?'

'At Maitland's Hotel in Cockburn Street. But I shall need to leave there, because it takes too much money to live in it.'

Miss Janet was quite taken aback. She looked very keenly again into the girl's face, but the large sweet eyes met hers fearlessly, conscious of no wrong. No, if ever innocence and purity of heart were reflected in a human countenance they were in Annie Erskine's, and immediately Miss Janet was wholly reassured. But it was strange, passing strange, for this girl, a mere child she seemed in the eyes of the older women, to be living alone in a city hotel.

'My dear, I must be very plain with you, because I wish to be kind,' she said, and she laid her little hand with the utmost gentleness on the girl's arm. 'There is a great deal about you which is very puzzling. I fear very much that unless you can give a more satisfactory account of yourself, you will find it impossible to get what you desire. Am I not right, Phemie Seton?'

'It is a very uncharitable world, sister,' answered Miss Phemie with a little sigh, for she felt her hope nipped in the bud.

'Ay, it is. Can you not tell us a little more, my dear,

about yourself, and where you came from, and why you are here? You look as if you had been well cared for, as if you had had a happy home, and a good father and mother.'

'So I had, so I had,' said the girl, with a half sob, and she turned her sweet face away to hide her quivering lips. Miss Janet gently patted the hand her own still touched, and Miss Phemie silently wiped away her own sympathetic tears.

'I cannot tell you very much, because I must be silent for the sake of others,' said the young girl, regaining her composure presently. 'I had to leave home because by staying I made others unhappy. It was no fault of my own. I would have helped it if I could. I saw that it was better for me to leave, so I came away, and they must not know where. But if I cannot get anything to do, I must go back or send, because I promised that I would never be in want.'

'Then they knew of your intention, and allowed you to go?' said Miss Janet breathlessly.

'No, they did not; but I could not leave, when they had been so good, without leaving a message; that was the message I left to comfort those who loved me.'

'My dear, you talk beautifully. One can hardly believe it is all real. You have made a sacrifice, then, for those you love?'

'Yes; but I did not know till now what a fearful thing it is to be cut off from all we love. If I had known, I think I should not have had strength to do it.'

'Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet, in a strange quick way, 'we will walk a little away, and have a talk, and Annie will watch our reticules till we come back. You will not go away, my dear. Yes, it is about you we are going to speak.'

And the little ladies went off arm-in-arm to devise a plan whereby they could help and benefit this friendless but heroic girl.

'Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet, with more agitation

than she usually betrayed, 'what can we do for that poor child?'

'Nothing, sister, unless we take her home with us.'

'And that we can hardly do; at least, what would the world say? It would say we were a couple of silly old fools. She may be an impostor, Phemie Seton, but she doesn't look like it.'

'No; and, Janet, has she not a look of our Annie about her, and a ring in her voice like our Annie's?' said Miss Phemie tremblingly. 'Why should she remind us so of our sister, if not to touch our hearts, and make us give her all the help we can?'

'She is willing to work. I like the way she speaks,' said Miss Janet, not appearing to notice the comparison her sister had drawn, though it had struck her also. 'I don't think, Phemie Seton, she would give the trouble Elizabeth Ann Jackson gave, and we would never miss her bite.'

It was a cheerful assurance, though in truth each bite in the little household was of importance.

'It would be delightful, truly delightful, sister, to have that bright young creature in the house; but what would Mrs. Christopher and Aunt Mackintosh say?'

'Let Mrs. Christopher and Aunt Mackintosh go to Kamtchatka,' quoth Miss Janet irately, 'though they will say we should be put in the asylum. Well, are we or are we not to take this child home with us, Phemie Seton? Mind you, I believe the Lord has sent her directly to us, and that He allowed you to be careless with your silver-clasped reticule on purpose.'

'I believe it too, Janet; and what a history is in the child's face! Miss Ferrier or Miss Austen could have made a beautiful story out of it. Do you think she has made the sacrifice for some suitor above her in station?'

'Oh, very likely. There will be a man of some kind in the matter. Well, Phemie Seton, we are agreed, are we? I

hope we may not rue our good nature. Well, well; we can't be left much poorer than we are, and I don't think that sweet child will rob us of our faith in our kind.'

'Oh no; and just think, Janet, of the perils we may save her from,' said Miss Phemie, and turned round to return to the seat, almost as if she feared these perils would be before her.

'Phemie Seton, she *is* like our Annie!' cried Miss Janet, and her ruddy cheek paled a little. 'Could it be? Oh, it could not; but I shall never rest until I find out all about her. Let us go and ask her if she will agree to our offer.'

There was a certain anxiety in the look which Annie Erskine cast on the two little ladies as they returned to her side. For two days she had been wandering about the city, seeking in such ways as she could think of for something to do. Of course, she had found it hard. There is not much pity in a great city for the young and friendless, especially if their pet be unaccompanied by any influential recommendation. It is an unequal strife, in which the friendless fall. Our Annie had tasted something of the deep bitterness of that weary search for work. She found the world, of which she had till now only heard and read, a poor place, after all, for such as she.

But she was being watched and cared for. She was a child of many prayers, and the heart of Adam Erskine the elder was constantly uplifted for his 'bairn.' It was put into the hearts of these two kind women, whom the world despised, to become the friends in need to Annie Erskine.

'Well, my dear,' said Miss Janet briskly, for she dearly loved to do a kind action; 'we have had our little talk. We are very sorry for you, and anxious to befriend you. We will tell you all about ourselves. We are orphans, and we live together, and though we have very little money, we are very happy and comfortable together. We have been trying lately to do without a little maid, but it is too much for us. You see my sister, Miss Seton, is very accomplished, and sits at

her easel all day.' It would have been impossible to tell whether Miss Janet was in earnest here or making fun of her sister, but there was certainly a twinkle in her eye. 'We are quite willing, my dear, if you are, that you should come home with us. You know how to work, and are very willing, you say, so we hope you will come. We cannot give you a great deal of money, but you will have a comfortable home; and, though we are poor, we are ladies, my dear, and connected with the best families in Edinburgh.'

Annie Erskine never spoke a word, but a sweet light, like the dawn on the summer sea, seemed to glow on her face.

'Will you come then, my dear?' asked Miss Janet, nodding reassuringly, when she saw the girl's beautiful eyes filling with large, slow tears.

'We will not ask any more questions,' continued Miss Janet, 'though I think it right to tell you, that I don't believe any other women in Edinburgh except Phemie Seton and I would do such a thing. Our nieces and nephews say we are cracked, and perhaps we are a little odd; but our hearts are all right, and, if you will trust us, you will not regret it.'

The tears had quite overflowed now, and were falling on Annie's trembling hands. She was very silent always in moments of deep feeling, and oh! surely that was one.

At last she found her voice. 'If you will take me,' she said, and the tones of that voice once more struck strange chords of memory in the hearts of the little sisters. 'I will serve you night and day. There is nothing I will not do to show my gratitude. I don't want money. I will serve you as faithfully as I have been taught to serve, for love.'

Miss Phemie was sobbing now, quite audibly, and her tears were falling to the serious detriment of her blue brocade.

'That's right, that's right, my dear. Don't cry,' said Miss Janet rather shrilly, for she felt rather shaky herself. 'And perhaps, after a while, when you know us better, you'll tell us all about yourself and your past troubles.'

'Yes,' said Annie. 'I will tell you it all some day very soon, because you have trusted me now. Every word I have said is truth.'

'Yes, yes, bless me. Do you think that, though we are odd, we have no discriminating powers? Well, I suppose if you are coming to be our little maid, the sooner you come the better. Suppose we take a cab, Phemie Seton, and bring her home at once.'

It was a curious agreement between mistress and maid; a curious scene altogether to be enacted in Princes Street Gardens. But nobody had paid any attention to it. Annie Erskine slept that night, though she did not know it, in the room, ay, in the very bed, her mother had occupied in her girlhood. With what deep gratitude she lay down in that bed, I cannot tell you. God had given to her at last, a home.

And the little sisters? They talked far into the night, and when they slept at last their slumber was sound and sweet, as it must be for all who have such hearts as theirs.



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CHAPTER XIX.

A NEW TROUBLE.

IT was not until he was seated in the train that night that Archie Grant began to wonder what could be the nature of the business which necessitated his presence in London. The longer he thought about it the more puzzling it seemed, but he was obliged to dismiss the subject at last, and try to possess his soul in patience till the morning. He slept part of the journey, and in his waking moments gave himself up to dreams of Annie, looking forward, as is the way of youth and hope, to a future which appeared to him without a cloud. He knew his father's ambition for him, and his own soul was not void of a desire to make life good and great, so far as opportunity presented itself in his way. He looked forward then, pictured a busy, useful life spent in his country's service. He saw Annie at his side, loved, admired, honoured wherever she went. *He* had no misgiving concerning her fitness for any position; but then he was very much in love.

Although he did not weary very much on the journey, he was glad when he arrived in London. He glanced hastily along the platform, half expecting to see his father waiting for him; then, signing to a porter, followed him to the Great Northern Hotel. He wondered a little at his father's choice of

residence. It was seldom, indeed, that Sir Archie slept in a hotel, as he had his own suite of rooms at his Club, where he could have comfort and quiet.

He was shown up at once to the private sitting-room, where his father was finishing breakfast.

'Archie, my boy, I thought I should have been in time to meet you,' cried Sir Archie, jumping up, and gripping the young man warmly by the hand. 'But I passed a wretched night, and I suppose must have slept in the morning, as it was eight when I awoke. Ring the bell, and they'll bring something up. It'll be in by the time you have washed.'

'Have you been ill, father?' asked Archie in concern, for his father's face was haggard and worn, and it seemed as if his hair had whitened since he left home.

'No, not ill, at least in body. I am horribly worried, my boy. But there, I shall not say a single word until you have breakfasted. I feel better and stronger at sight of you, Archie,' said the elder man, looking affectionately at his stalwart son.

Archie took up his portmanteau, and departed to a dressing-room in a perplexed frame of mind. He could not understand his father's changed appearance and troubled looks. He knew of nothing to cause them, and yet he was not a man given to imagining ills. There must be some real cause.

He did not linger long over his toilet. In ten minutes he was back in the sitting-room, where he swallowed a hasty breakfast, and then turned inquiringly to his father, who had the *Times* before him, but had not raised his eye from the top of the column where he had first fixed it.

'Now, dad, for this momentous worry. Let's hear it, as I can't for the life of me give it any shape. Why, I thought everything was going swimmingly of late—investments and everything returning a decent percentage; so what *can* it be?'

Sir Archie smoothed out his paper on the table, and turned his anxious eye full on his son's fine, open face.

'It is a worse trouble than an unprofitable investment, my boy, and one which, I fear, will completely ruin us. Can't you make a guess at it?'

'No, how can I?' quoth the young man impatiently. 'Don't keep me in suspense.'

'Well, Archie, I suppose I need not ask you whether you remember the story of your uncle, who married foolishly and went abroad with his young wife?'

'I remember it perfectly.'

'You have heard me say that for years I felt that I only held the place in trust for him and his. It is only of late years I have felt at all secure in my position. A young man has turned up, come home from India, claiming to be his son, and demanding his rights. Is not that trouble enough, Archie?'

Archie sprang to his feet.

'Oh, nonsense! Uncle Archie's son! If he really existed, why have we never heard of him before? Is his mother with him?'

'Yes, but I have not seen her.'

'Have you seen him?'

'Yes, and I must say, Archie, that he has a look of his father, provided your uncle was his father. The thing seemed trivial enough until I saw him.'

'Where is he?'

'Here, in London, just now; but he has been down in Berwickshire, and went to Purves, at Ayton. He had the whole place explored before we knew of it. Purves only told me after he had gone.'

'And what does Purves say?'

'He pretends to laugh at it, but I can see that it is worrying him. He came up with me on Monday night, and we were together at Bold's all yesterday.'

'And what does Bold say?'

'Bold says it is a tissue of lies, the story the young

man has brought with him, and pooh-poohs the whole affair.'

'I am of Bold's opinion, and he is one of the sharpest barristers in London. What kind of proof has this fellow brought with him?'

'He has some things which undoubtedly belonged to your uncle; his watch, with chain and seals, marked with our crest, and there are letters, too.'

'But is there a certificate of his mother's marriage, and of his birth?'

'No, these are wanting, though they say they can procure copies. It seems they have been lost through carelessness.'

Archie Grant laughed. Somehow he did not feel much inclined to take this matter at all seriously.

'Dear dad, don't bother your head. The thing's a bogus story, and the claim will prove a bogus claim too, you will see. You'll be going to fight, I suppose, should it come to a fight, though it seems too absurd.'

'Bold thinks the lad will be easily silenced; but there is the haunting fear that, though we may manage to put him down, by so doing we may be doing a great wrong. It would be a fearful thing, Archie, to keep St. Veda's from the rightful heir.'

'I am its rightful heir after you, dad,' cried young Archie manfully, 'and I won't give up my rights easily, I promise you. Where is the claimant to be seen?'

'I promised to meet him at twelve o'clock to-day, and to go with him to see his mother. I wanted you to accompany me.'

'All right,' said Archie, and then a silence fell upon them, which somehow neither cared to break.

'You can't wonder, my boy, that this has annoyed me,' said Sir Archie at length. 'You know the state of my affairs. I am a poor man. Should this claim be established, there is nothing but beggary before me. I have no calling to fall back upon; and I am too old to learn. There is a fearful

error in the upbringing of gentlemen's sons, Archie. Absolutely no provision is made for the vicissitudes of life, and yet these meet us on every hand. I fear I have not done wisely by you, my boy.'

'Yes, you have; you've given me a sound constitution and a good education. It's my own blame if I don't make use of these. *I'm* all right. It's mamma and Ethel that are bothering you, I see. But *don't* give up hope. Bless me, you'll see there's nothing in it. Do you suppose Uncle Archie's widow and child, if they had lived, would not have been heard of long since? It's too preposterous to think of it.'

It was impossible not to be imbued with something of the young man's hopes and courage. The cloud lifted a little from Sir Archie's brow; the burden, shared with another, lost half its heaviness; he even smiled, looking at his son's handsome, flushed face. Archie Grant was burning with indignation against the impostor, as he had at once designated him. He refused to entertain even for a moment the idea that there might be a shadow of truth in the story. To him it was a tissue of falsehoods, a thing to laugh at, or be indignant at perhaps; but to entertain seriously for a moment, never.

Yet he could understand how it weighed on his father's heart. He thought of the frail women at St. Veda's, to whom luxury and ease were almost as necessary as the breath of life, and sympathized greatly with his father's harassing anxiety. Had there been a possibility that any truth might be found in this claim, it would have been a serious matter indeed for them all.

'It seems hard, if, after the best years of my life have been given to St. Veda's, I should be cast adrift. The years during which I held trust were lost to me, for I could not carve my own path in life. There would be injustice, I think, in the law which would count all I have done as nothing, and turn me off without a penny in favour of this youth. Without a penny it would be practically, Archie, for there is no provision made for younger sons. The few thousands my father left to

me have been all spent on the place, and I could claim no compensation. The new Laird might, of course, give me of his bounty if he so pleased, but he would not be legally bound.'

'Oh, father, it makes me wild to hear you speak!' cried young Archie hotly. 'Of his bounty, indeed! I think you had better let me go alone to see this precious would-be relative of ours, or I am convinced you'll hand over the whole thing to him without let or hindrance.'

Sir Archie smiled at his son's impetuous speech.

'No, we'll go together, and we'll temper each other,' he said quietly. 'You left your mother and Ethel well, I hope?'

'Oh yes, all right; but I can't speak of anything but this strange affair. What manners has this young fellow? Is he aggressive and assertive, or is he rather apologetic?'

'A curious mixture of both, and he is very respectful to me. I rather think from what he says that it is at his mother's instigation rather than his own that he has come forward with his claim. And yet why not?' said Sir Archie with a sigh. 'If she be really Archie's widow, it is not to be expected that she should wish her boy *not* to claim his own. But there are a good many things requiring to be cleared up. It will take time and money, too. We have a lot of harassing care before us, Archie.'

'I should just think it *will* require clearing up,' cried the young man again. 'It is hardly likely we are going to walk meekly out of the place before we prove whether the claimant is an impostor or not. Well, are we going to keep our appointment?'

'Yes, we had better go round by the Temple, and you can hear what Bold has to say. Mrs., or Lady Grant, as she calls herself, and her son, are staying at a private hotel in Arundel Street, and it is there I must keep my appointment at noon.'

The father and son drove in a hansom to the Temple, but did not talk much on the way. Sir Archie was pre-occupied,

as perhaps was natural, but it made his son indignantly sorry to see him so downcast.

It was not Sir Archie's nature to take a gloomy view of things, and yet, if this claim should be established, his outlook for the future was not particularly bright. He was a man past middle life, the best of his days were gone, and with them the desire or ability to lay his hand to any new thing. Secure in his inheritance, he had of late years spent more lavishly, and had nothing to 'all back upon in the day of need. He had indeed spent his all on St. Veda's. It had come to him heavily burdened, and by self-denial and strict economy he had paid off the burdens one by one. And were these self-denying years to have this ending, that he should be sent adrift, with age stealing on him, with two helpless women depending on him, to face the cruel world, which has so very little encouragement or sympathy to give those who are down?

'I think there would be no difficulty in getting a Government appointment for you, Archie,' he said, giving voice to one uppermost thought. 'We have a good many friends in the Government, and Lord Marchbanks would do his best for your father's son, for the sake of school and college days.'

'We won't ask him,' said young Archie rather savagely. 'I intend to stand for the Shire at the election; and as for this abominable business, I tell you plainly that, whatever you do, *I'll* fight the ground to the last inch, if the upstart hasn't the common sense to retire before it comes to a real warfare.'

'But, Archie, suppose he is your cousin; think of the injustice.'

'Well, if he is my cousin, let him prove it to my satisfaction, and I'll ask his pardon, and retire with becoming grace,' said Archie grimly. 'In the meantime, it is war to the knife between the two Archies. I suppose he calls himself Archibald Grant?'

'Of course. Well, here we are. It is possible Bold may

not be up in town yet. He is a rich man, Archie, and can afford to take his ease. He seldom comes up before noon.'

But Mr. Bold was in his private room, and unfeignedly glad to see his client. He had known Sir Archie at Eton, and though they had not had the same *Alma Mater*, the schoolboy friendship had never been dimmed. Francis Bold belonged to an old Shropshire family, the Bolds of Winthorpe Hall, and it was pure love of the law which had made him choose it as a profession. Such being the case, it was natural that he should be one of its most brilliant ornaments. He was a splendidly handsome man, tall, well-built, aristocratic-looking, with nothing to mark the lawyer, except perhaps the penetrating keenness of his flashing eyes. He was Sir Archie's senior by two years, but looked many years younger.

'Good morning, Grant; and this is your son, eh? A tall fellow, but not quite such a giant as mine. These young upstarts make us old fellows, don't they? Sit down, sit down. And what do *you* think, my lad, about this bogus claim?'

There was a twinkle in his eye which was immensely reassuring to young Archie. Perhaps he had been slightly influenced by his father's inclination to take the matter very seriously.

'I'm glad to hear you call it a bogus claim, Mr. Bold. Don't you think it foolish of my father to regard it seriously for a moment?'

'Yes; but sometimes these things give more worry than more formidable affairs,' returned the lawyer. 'You have not yet seen the person calling herself Lady Grant?'

'No; we are on our way to keep an appointment with her this morning,' returned Sir Archie. 'I am not very sure about taking this young man, in case he should treat our relatives to some plain speaking. It is not easy to bridle the young colts, Bold.'

'You are right, but I would give him a licence here were

I you,' laughed the lawyer. 'Well, Mr. Archie, I have done my utmost to persuade your father that there is nothing to be apprehended from these people. I have looked into the thing thoroughly, and I assure you both it couldn't stand. There are too many missing links. If they persist in pushing their claim, they'll dearly rue it.'

'It is possible, Mr. Bold, for proof to be lost through carelessness. If they can establish their identity, I should be the last man to refuse them justice,' said Sir Archie anxiously.

'My dear Sir Archie, if they succeed in establishing their identity, the law will see that they have justice in spite of you,' said the lawyer, laughing again. 'I entreat you, don't trouble your head about it. Will you look in after the interview, and let me know what your opinion of the lady is? I hope to have the pleasure of seeing her myself soon. She must be a clever adventuress.'

'Don't bestow these epithets on her until it is proved that she is an adventuress, Bold,' said Sir Archie as they rose to go.

'Your father is ultra-sensitive, Mr. Archie,' said the lawyer as he shook hands with the young man. He watched him cross the Temple Court with a curious expression on his handsome face.

'Poor Grant!' he said to himself, 'this was told upon him. He is not the man he was; but the boy, like all boys, has fight in him, and will show it in good time. He will do battle for himself and his father too.'



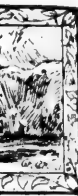


CHAPTER XX.

MY LADY GRANT.

SHE was a very handsome woman, and was aware of the fact. Her finely-moulded figure was admirably set off by the perfect fit of her sweeping black gown; her soft hair, just streaked with silver, was smoothly braided under the exquisitely becoming morsel of lace and tulle which could scarcely be called a cap. Yes, a handsome woman, and a lady beyond a doubt was she who called herself the widow of Sir Archibald Grant of St. Veda's and Mount Meldrum. Her face, perfect in feature though it was, had not the winning expression and sweetness which would have made her irresistible. There was a restlessness in the eye, a firm, even hard line about the mouth, which gave some index to the nature within. She was a woman who, all her life since her very childhood, had been taught to make the best of her opportunities. She had very early learned the lesson of self-reliance and prompt action, and with these two weapons, coupled with a woman's consummate tact and fascination, had made capital out of opportunities which in the hands of any other woman would have been meagre indeed. She had dressed herself with more than usual care that morning, and the result was perfection.

A miniature brooch, set in fine small diamonds, fastened the



soft quilting at her stately throat. There was a touch of white at the wrists also, which only set off the exceeding fairness of her beautiful hands. She wore no ornament on them except her wedding ring. Her expression had been long studied, and seemed natural—a skilful and touching combination of sweet resignation and pensive regret.

The ordinary observer could not have passed her by without a thrill of admiration and pity. She had exercised her taste in the arrangement of the small drawing-room at the hotel. Without doing very much, she had added a few touches here and there—these indescribable touches which only a woman's hand can give, the careless draping of a curtain here and there, a gleam of bright colour to relieve a sombre corner, or something set to tone down a more objectionable tint, and the arranging of plants and flowers everywhere—all these had made of the plain, unlovely room, a place something in keeping with the graceful presence of the woman who had made it her temporary home. The blinds were down, and the curtains swaying lazily to and fro in the gentle wind; the room was fresh and cool and sweet, when the two gentlemen were ushered into it.

Lady Grant, as she wished to be called, rose to her feet at the opening of the door, and stood ready to receive them, her manner touched with unmistakable dignity and grace. Archibald Grant the younger started as his eyes fell upon her, and a chill seemed to cross his heart. The woman had the look of a queen; dignity, pride, breeding were in her very attitude. Looking at her, he felt that it *might* be true, after all.

'Good morning,' she said, with a slight smile and inclination of the head.

Sir Archie gravely bowed, and looked towards his son.

'This is my son. He has just come up from Scotland. It was necessary, of course, that he should be immediately acquainted with your arrival in England.'

'I am pleased to see him. I should have known him a Grant anywhere. He is very like his cousin.'

She extended her hand with gracious frankness as she uttered these words.

'And you,' she said with emphasis, as she looked on the face of the elder man, 'are so like my dead husband, that my heart nearly stood still when you came into the room. I cannot expect that you can be glad to see me; but will you be seated please? Archie will be in presently. I think you are rather before your time.'

Mechanically they took the chairs to which she pointed. They were dumb in her presence. It was as if she had cast over them some subtle spell. But the gloom perceptibly deepened on Sir Archie's face. If he had had a doubt in his mind regarding this woman's identity, it fled at sight of her. She was no vulgar impostor, but a lady, beautiful, gracious in manner and mien, fit enough mate for any Grant that ever lived. He no longer wondered at that old infatuation which had made his hot-headed brother throw prudence to the winds. The beauty, rare still in its maturity, must in early youth have been a thing to marvel at. She saw the impression she had made, and her heart thrilled with triumph. She was playing a desperate game. In her own heart she had had, till now, but a faint hope of success. But an unscrupulous, ambitious woman will dare much even for one slender chance of success. 'I can scarcely hope that you are glad to see me,' she repeated in her sweet, caressing voice. 'This interview is as painful for me as it is for you. You may believe that it is only for my son's sake that I should ever have come back to England. I could have struggled on in India alone, but I had a sacred duty to fulfil towards him.'

'What we cannot understand, madam,' said Sir Archie, and his voice had a weary ring in it, 'is why you have allowed so many years to elapse between your husband's death and your return. If you are indeed the widow of my poor brother,

why did you not acquaint us with the true circumstances of his death as well as with the existence of your son? I understood him to say to Mr. Bold that his father had been dead for more than twenty years.'

'Twenty-two years past last August,' said the widow, and her eyes had a far-off look in them, as if memory bridged that wide space, and renewed the sting of that bitter sorrow.

'I am quite well aware that that will seem unaccountable to most people, to all who do not know *me*,' she said, with a catch in her voice. 'But, sir, remember the circumstances of my marriage. My own people turned against me completely; my mother would not even bid me good-bye. You will not have forgotten, I suppose, what treatment I received at the hand of Sir Archibald Grant, my boy's grandfather. He looked at me that day in Edinburgh as if I were meaner than the dust beneath his feet, though his firstborn son had thought me worthy to be his wife. When we set sail that day from Liverpool, we said, in the bitterness of our hearts, that never again should we set foot in England. We made a vow that we should live and die in the land of our adoption, a vow which was renewed on my husband's deathbed.'

'*He* had no ambition, then, for his son to claim his own?' said Sir Archie, keeping his eye keenly fixed on the woman's face.

'None. He never forgot or forgave his father's treatment of me. For more than twenty years I have kept that vow, but I have broken it now for my son's sake.'

There was a silence then for a few minutes. Sir Archie kept his eyes fixed keenly on the face of the woman before him. She might have quailed beneath that searching, mournful gaze, but she was an actress of consummate skill. As he looked, it was as if some sudden inspiration came to him. His son saw his listlessness vanish; saw him draw himself up as if some new strength, a renewal of hope, had been infused into his soul.

'Have you had any communication with your own kindred since your return to England?'

A slight, very slight colour rose in Lady Grant's fair cheek. He had laid his finger on a weak point; here she must be on her guard.

'We have made inquiries, and I have learned that my mother is dead. If my sisters are still alive, we have been unable to trace them,' she answered quietly. 'It is my intention to go to Edinburgh very soon to make full personal inquiries. I fear, however, that neither of my sisters has survived. As a family we were not robust.'

'Your maiden name was Seton, I understand.'

'Yes, Annie Forbes-Seton. We were of a good family, brother, though your father held us in such scorn.'

Young Archie bit his lip. The word 'brother' could not be expected to fall pleasantly on his ears.

'Pardon me if I seem inquisitive, madam,' said Sir Archie gravely. 'It is natural that I should be anxious to hear the fullest particulars about my brother. Tell me what he did in India. He took small means with him, and as we never again heard of or from him, we could send him no help.'

'We did not need it, we were happier without it,' was the proud reply. 'Although my husband was a Grant of St. Veda's, he was not too proud to work with his hands for his wife. On the voyage we became acquainted with a gentleman who owned an extensive sugar plantation about two hundred miles from Madras. I suppose Archie told him something of our circumstances, for he offered him a situation on the estate, and we travelled up with him directly on landing. We found there a happy home.'

'What kind of a situation?'

Archie the younger could almost have smiled at the manner of his father's questioning. It was grave, quiet, measured as that of a judge.

'As a kind of manager over the coolies; of course it was

menial toil for a Grant, but he never regretted it. The master and his wife were our kind, devoted friends. Yes, we were very happy in our little home.'

'Did you remain there till his death?'

'Yes, my husband caught a chill, and died of ague after four days' illness.'

'And did he not urge you to return to your own people?'

'No, he advised me to stay where I was. Those who had befriended him would continue to befriend me and my child. They did so. I continued an inmate of their home from my husband's death till seven months ago, when we left for England.'

'It was certainly extraordinary kindness,' said Sir Archie. 'You seem to have ample means,' he added, glancing round the room. 'Have these good friends provided the means also?'

'That is my concern,' she replied, with striking haughtiness. 'I have suffered your questioning because you are my husband's brother; but I must decline to answer any more.'

'If my questioning seems severe, madam, it will prepare you for what is to come,' said Sir Archie quietly. 'Mine is nothing to the cross-examination to which you will be subjected in a court of law.'

'In a court of law? My son and I hope that we will not be compelled to resort to severe measures. We will be generous—we have no wish that you should suffer through us, brother. I only wish a little for my son, and the revenues of St. Veda's and Mount Meldrum should suffice for all. Ah! here comes Archie. Come, my boy; your uncle and cousin have been here quite a long time.'

The two gentlemen rose, and young Archie, with flushing face and flashing eye, looked keenly at the young man who had entered the room.

'How do you do, cousin?' said the interloper, obeying a glance from his mother's eye. 'Good morning, uncle;



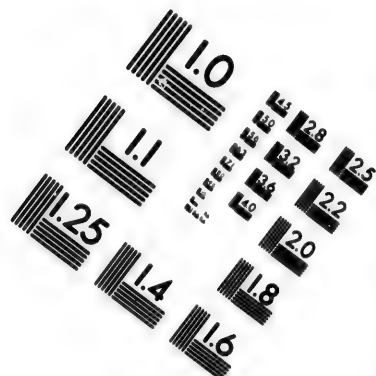
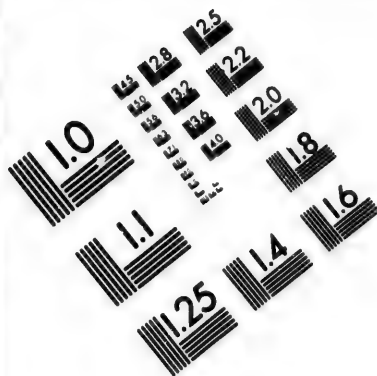
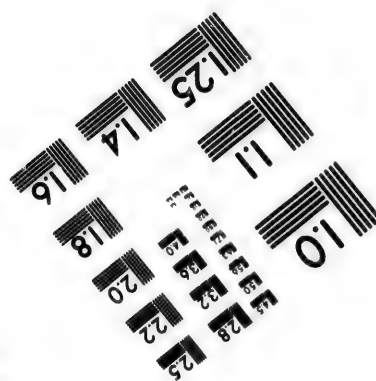
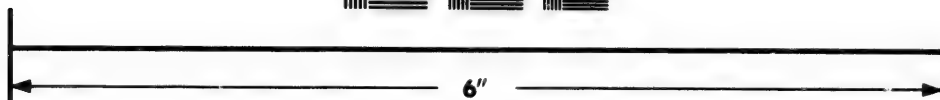
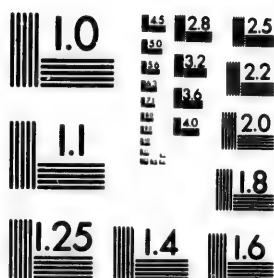


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very glad to see you both.' He was a gentlemanly youth, but had not his mother's distinguished bearing. Archie gave his head a little jerk intended for a bow.

'There's no use shaking hands as cousins till we're sure about it,' he said bluntly, at which a silvery laugh fell from the widow's lips.

'That is Scotch caution indeed!' she said carelessly, but there was a certain uneasiness underlying her lightness of manner. 'Well, my son, we have had quite a long talk. It is as we feared, and as we could not but expect. We are received with doubt and suspicion. There is a possibility even that we may be obliged to resort to the law.'

A peculiar smile dawned on the lips of Sir Archie.

'What would you think of us, madam, were we to quit our home and give up our rights without question or doubt? Men do not, as a rule, give up so lightly what they hold so dear.'

'Ah, no!' said the widow with a sympathetic sigh. 'I understand and deeply sympathize with your feelings. I bear the Grants no ill-will, and my husband never spoke of you but with warm affection. The thought of what our appearance might cost you has given me many a sting. But I look at my boy, brother. I have a mother's heart and a mother's pride. Our life in India was at best but a struggle. It was but natural that, knowing what rights he had here, I should be persuaded to seek to establish them. I was torn between two conflicting ideas of duty.'

'You need not have been, madam,' returned Sir Archie curtly and coldly. 'Your duty to your son should have been paramount. If he be indeed the son of my brother, his place as master of St. Veda's cannot long be kept from him. You shall have justice from me and mine, madam, at any cost.'

She looked narrowly at Sir Archie from under her half-veiled eyes. She did not quite understand him. She had heard of him from her son as a soft, kind, pliable man, with whom

there would be little difficulty. But in her first interview with him she had not found him so. She saw perfectly well that he neither trusted her nor gave the slightest credence to her story. The struggle was to be harder than she had expected.

'It will be extremely painful for me and for my son if we have to take action; will it not, Archie?' she said, turning to the young man who stood by the table twirling his moustache.

'Yes, it will be horrid. It would be so much nicer to settle it amicably,' he said rather hesitatingly. 'I don't want everything, but it is hard on a fellow to have nothing when he should have a title and estate by rights. Is it not now, cousin?'

Young Archie's lip curled, and he turned on his heel. The spell which the beautiful woman had cast over him was broken, and once more the aggressive spirit was roused in him.

'If you can satisfy the law, madam, the law will satisfy you,' said Sir Archie, as he took up his hat and gloves.

'Then there is to be war, brother? You intend to hold by what you have enjoyed illegally so long?' said Lady Grant quickly. 'You will compel us to make the law our judge?'

'Yes, madam. I am not satisfied. I leave the matter entirely in my solicitor's hands. Come, Archie,' he said, and with a distant and haughty inclination of the head he passed out.

'By Jove, father, you gave it her hot,' said young Archie on the stairs. 'I don't know what to think, but evidently you're not satisfied.'

'That is not the woman your uncle married, my boy,' said the baronet quietly. 'I shall fight the case out to the end.'



CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER BLOW.

THEY drove straight back to Mr. Bold's office, from which they had not been absent more than a couple of hours. Sir Archie entered the lawyer's presence with a briskness of step and erectness of bearing which were not lost on that gentleman. 'Well?' he asked cheerily, as he turned round in his chair. 'Unless I am mistaken, Sir Archie, this interview has brought you over to my way of thinking, eh?'

'I am certainly convinced in my own mind, as seriously convinced as I ever was in my life, that the lady we saw to-day is not my brother's widow.'

'Ah! You told me, I think, that you did not see your brother's wife before they left England,' said the lawyer thoughtfully.

'No, but she was very minutely described to me, and, as far as my memory serves me, the description represented a very different type of woman from the one we saw to-day.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, my brother described Miss Seton to me as a slight, fair-haired, timid little woman; just the very antipodes of the lady we saw to-day.'

'Lady Grant did not favourably impress you, then?' said the lawyer, with a slight smile.

'She is very handsome; one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.'

'Adventuresses usually possess personal charms beyond the common run,' said the lawyer. 'Is she a lady?'

'Yes, that is the astonishing thing. There is nothing vulgar about either.'

'The son is certainly a well-bred and inoffensive youth. It is as I suspected; he is in his mother's leading strings, if she is his mother. The relationships between those who exist by their wits sometimes present a curious problem,' said the lawyer, carefully sharpening the point of his pencil. 'And what do *you* think, Mr. Archie, of this thrilling romance?'

'When I first saw the lady I confess I was taken aback, and began to fear that there might be truth in her story. But that feeling soon gave place to a curious distrust and suspicion.'

The lawyer nodded.

'Just so. Then do you think they'll show fight?'

'Undoubtedly; they seemed amazed when my father said the law would decide between us.'

'A charming state of innocence they must be in,' said Mr. Bold, with an amused smile. 'Did they think that any man in his senses, or out of them either for that matter, would walk out of a place like St. Veda's to let anybody take possession? We'll give them a fright soon. Are you going to remain in town, Sir Archie?'

'There is no need, I think. We can come up if there is any necessity. I leave the thing entirely with you.'

'Very well. I shall do myself the honour of waiting on Lady Grant to-day or to-morrow, then I'll have an interview with Pengarth. A decent fellow, Pengarth. I cannot fathom the stupidity which has allowed him to give these people his countenance.'

'We must make inquiries about the Setons. It is a well-known Edinburgh name,' said Sir Archibald. 'I fear the play we saw to-day is not aware how difficult it will be to

establish her claim as a member of that widespread family. If the sisters are still alive, I should think a single meeting between them and her would settle the whole business. You can't deceive your own kindred.'

'It has been done. I have known some extraordinary cases, Sir Archie. There is nothing impossible, and twenty-three years is a long time. But there need be no hurry. We'll go to work cautiously, or rather just wait and watch the moves of the enemy. There is plenty of time to prepare for the Grant Succession Case before the sittings of the next Court of Session in Edinburgh,' said the lawyer jokingly. He changed the subject at once, however, for he saw a slight flush rise to Sir Archie's brow.

To fight for his rights, to have the name of Grant bandied from mouth to mouth, and old stories raked up for comment in the public press; these things would be unbearable to him. He was a man who would almost rather retire quietly and suffer in secret. He hoped and prayed the thing would never come before a court of law.

'Good-bye then, if you are going back to Scotland to-night,' said the lawyer heartily. 'I'll keep you acquainted with matters here, and let you know the result of my interview with your august relative. Good-bye, Mr. Archie; don't let your father brood over this affair. It is not worth his while.'

It was easy to give these assurances; not so easy to remove all anxiety from Sir Archie's mind. Although he was absolutely convinced in his mind that the woman who called herself Lady Grant had no claim whatever to the title, it was a difficult task to set aside the annoyance which the whole matter caused and might yet cause to him and his. He was a man of peace, and besides his pride rebelled at the thought of his position being assailed.

'The Grant Succession Case.' These words rang their changes in his ears, each time with a more disagreeable and discordant sound.

Young Archie sympathized with his father's feelings, but with the customary buoyancy of youth he had dismissed the trouble from his mind. In his opinion the whole matter was settled. The people were impostors, and would speedily be proved so. There was no use in giving the thing any further thought. So he gave himself up again to sweet dreams of the dear girl he had left behind, and grew impatient for the hours to pass till he should see her again.

They travelled to Scotland by the night mail, and though neither slept, they did not talk much until they came near the Border. Then Archie determined to broach the subject of Annie Erskine to his father. There did not exist a more open-hearted young fellow than this; he would keep no secrets; every action of his life was a page which all who ran might read. But, remembering how his mother had received his confidence, he had not quite the same encouragement to open his heart to his father. Yet, being convinced that it was his duty, he would perform that duty at any cost. Had Sir Archie been less absorbed by his own thoughts, he might have observed the curious restlessness which seemed to possess his son.

'Can't you sit still, boy?' he asked at length, as Archie, in his peregrinations through the car, stumbled over his outstretched feet.

'No, I can't. I'm jolly glad we're getting near home. You telegraphed to Phillips, didn't you?'

'Of course, he'll be there right enough. Are we near Berwick?'

'Must be, for it's nearly four o'clock. Are you not inclined to sleep, dad?'

'No, I'm too worried to sleep, but I wonder you have not been oblivious of everything long ago.'

'I have a lot to think of too,' said Archie, a trifle shamefacedly.

'You haven't many cares yet, my boy,' said Sir Archie

affectionately. 'It is when one has wife and children dependent on one that cares begin to press home. I suppose the best joys of life *must* in their very nature be shadowed by care.'

'I hope I'll have these same cares soon,' said Archie, with a light laugh. 'I don't think they would weigh very heavily on me.'

'Don't be in a hurry, Archie. I hope you'll get a good wife some day ; and other things being equal, I hope she'll bring you a portion too. There is no doubt that money, and the right use of it, sweetens life.'

'Whatever she may bring, she won't have a money portion,' said young Archie. 'I did not expect *you*, dad, to be an advocate for a mercenary marriage.'

'I am not. There is no man who would more heartily condemn marrying merely for money. It is a fearful mistake, and can result only in misery. I said, other things being equal. Your mother and I are not without our hopes and ambitions for you, my boy. It is natural that we should be keeping our eyes open for your settlement in life. Do you know whom it would give us the greatest happiness to see the future mistress of St. Veda's?'

'No,' said Archie, and his countenance fell. 'Who is it?'

'Alice Dalrymple ; a good girl, and beautiful as she is good. As an only child she will have an immense fortune, and that would be invaluable to you in your public life. I know my old friend the Colonel would be very favourably disposed to the alliance.'

There was a certain anxiety in Sir Archie's tone and manner as he uttered these words. He had an inward consciousness that they were hardly judicious, and that love affairs, as a rule, were best left to manage themselves ; but his mind was harassed about the future, and he could not withhold from his son the nature of his hopes. The dawn was now breaking, and in the grey light struggling through

the carriage windows he saw a look of blank dismay on the lad's face, which sufficiently indicated that he did not share these hopes.

'Well, my boy, you need not look so aghast,' he said, with a slight smile. 'There are dozens who would be thankful for your chance. Do you not admire Alice Dalrymple?'

'Admire her! Oh yes; at least, she is just like other women. I never think about them. There is only one woman in the world who has the least interest for me, and that is the woman I am going to marry.'

'Who is she?'

Sir Archie started up, and leaned forward with intense anxiety.

'Annie Erskine.'

Young Archie uttered the name boldly, and yet with a lingering tenderness of tone which told how dear it was. No man could accuse him of lack of courage to avow his love. The lad was true to the heart's core.

'Annie Erskine!'

Sir Archie repeated the words slowly, and then fell back in his seat, and wrapped his rug about his limbs as if the cold dawn chilled him. His hopes were chilled, that was all, but to him that day it seemed a great deal.

'You can't deny that she is worth loving, father,' said the young man quickly, for he saw the shadow on his father's face, and felt his disapproval in his heart. 'I have loved her, I think, all my life, and when I came home this summer I knew what kind of love it was, and that I could never marry any other. My mother knows of this.'

'Your mother knows?' said Sir Archie inquiringly.

'Yes; I told her on Tuesday night after I had been with Annie.'

'Then you have passed your word to the girl?'

'I have asked her to be my wife, and she has promised, though conditionally.'

'Then there is no more to be said. No Grant ever breaks his word,' said Sir Archie, and closing his eyes, kept his hand over them, and remained silent. His tone was not reproachful, but it was hopeless. It sent a keen pang to the boy's heart, for the love between them had never till now been marred or shadowed by the slightest difference.

'Father, let me speak to you about it. I never imagined it would be a grief to you,' he cried impulsively. 'I have often heard you say that a good woman, however poor, was worth her weight in gold, and I thought you were fond of Annie.'

'I have nothing against the girl. She is good and lovable enough, but not for *you*,' said Sir Archie a trifle coldly. 'It is a pity there has been such intimacy, but I took no thought. I have been under the impression all along that she was to marry the skipper's son, and I am sure your mother thought so too.'

Archie was silent. What could he say in reply?

'What did your mother say?'

'She was astonished at first, of course, and a little dismayed, but I soon won her over to my side. She promised to go down to the Haven for Annie next day. Mrs. Erskine has not been kind to her since she refused to marry Adam. I myself heard her say there was no welcome in the house for her.'

'Dear me, I thought the skipper's cottage was a perfect dove's nest,' said Sir Archie wearily. 'High and low must bear trouble alike. And your mother promised to bring Annie up to the Castle, knowing she was your promised wife?'

'Yes, she did.'

'We shall probably find her there then.'

'I expect and hope so.'

'Then if your mother has given her sanction and countenance to your betrothed wife, I cannot withhold mine; but I will not attempt to hide my disappointment,' said Sir Archie

gravely. 'It is only in story-books one finds stony hearted parents who break the hearts of their children,' he added, with a slight sad smile. 'Yet no; I had forgotten your uncle Archie. I need not have forgotten *that*, but *I* shall not add a similar record to the annals of our house.'

Young Archie still felt most keenly the disapproval so plainly expressed by his father. In the hot-headedness of youth he had imagined that the current of his wooing must flow smoothly; but the reality was very different. His father's sad, quiet, hopeless manner went to his heart, and made him more wretched than a storm of angry words could have done.

'I must be plain with you, my son,' said Sir Archie presently, looking with grave, affectionate eyes into the boy's handsome, downcast face. 'Have you seriously weighed this step? You must be aware that if you marry Annie Erskine, she will not be a help but a hindrance to your future. She knows nothing, and a sweet face and a winsome way will not make the world forget or forgive any breach of its decorum.'

'That is how my mother spoke, but Annie can learn. My mother and Ethel will teach her. She has had no opportunity, yet there is nothing common or vulgar about her.'

'No, but she is not of us,' said the baronet. 'You are quite sure that you care enough for her to champion her through whatever may betide? You will have to bear coldness and neglect for her sake.'

'I will die for her,' said young Archie, with all a lover's fervour.

'You must live for her first, and sometimes that is a greater trial of love than death,' said the father soberly. 'Well, my lad, I feel as if circumstances were making an old, worn-out man of me. This has not been a very pleasant trip for me.'

Archie's heart went out to his father, and he longed to be able to remove all care from his shoulders. Well he might; he had been the best of fathers to him. Sir Archie saw the

moistening of his son's bright eye, and understood the emotion which prompted it. These two could never be long or seriously at variance.

'Well, here we are,' he said cheerily. 'It will be pleasant to get home, whatever betides. Don't take what I've said too seriously to heart, lad. I am disappointed, but I'm not going to show it. God bless you and your wife. Whoever she may be, Archie, she will be dear to your father for your sake.'

'God bless *you*, sir,' said young Archie, with visible emotion. As he gripped his father's hand he thought no shame to raise it to his lips.





CHAPTER XXII.

WORRIED.

IN the grey dawn of the early morning they drove along the white dusty roads to St. Veda's. The mystery of the daybreak was on sky and sea and land, and the silvery expanse of the ocean seemed to be held very still by some unseen influence.

There was not a ripple on its breast. The air was not without a touch of chilliness though the winds were at rest; the two travellers were glad of their wraps as they drove rapidly home. The morning was very still; bird and bee were still asleep, and the flowers had drooping heads, waiting for the hopeful greeting of the new day. Archie Grant kept his eyes on Orr's Haven during the few moments it was in sight from the high road, not dreaming that the red roof of the skipper's cottage no longer made a shelter for his dwelling. When they reached the Castle, they found the faithful, attentive old housekeeper, who had grown grey in the service of the house, waiting to give them a warm breakfast before they should seek a few hours' sleep. The sun rose upon them as they sat at the round table in the breakfast parlour, enjoying a cup of fragrant coffee after their cold ride.

'The ladies are well, Mrs. Hewitt?' said Sir Archie.

'All well, Sir Archie. My lady would have been down herself, but she had a bit of a headache last night, and went

to bed early. Miss Ethel was out all day yesterday, at the Haven mostly; but it was a fine day, and, as she was home before sundown, I think she got no harm. Some more coffee, Master Archie?'

'No, thank you.'

Archie longed to ask whether Annie was in the Castle, but thought it better not. Mrs. Hewitt would have liked to tell the news, but thought it better to let them have a rest first. She had a shrewd guess that the disappearance of Annie Erskine from Orr's Haven would have a curious effect on the young Laird. Mrs. Hewitt was a woman who spoke little, but saw much, and thought a great deal. She was a model servant, shrewd, cautious, reserved, and yet not without powers of observation. She was not only a valued servant, but an honoured friend of the family, for whom she would have laid down her own life.

Tired out with the journey and the excitement of the hurried visit to London, young Archie fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow; but his father tossed uneasily on his restless couch. His mind was full of forebodings, and, in spite of his cheerful unselfishness, the announcement of his son's betrothal to Annie Erskine had been a sore blow to him. He had hoped to see the fair daughter of The Holme as his son's wife. Not only was the maiden winsome in herself, but her fortune would have been the making of St. Veda's and its heir. Sir Archie had been hampered and held down all his days through lack of gold. No man valued money less for its own sake, but he knew it to be the golden key to all doors, and he had hoped that his son would never be harassed by sordid care; and now, at the very outset of his bright career, he had pledged himself to a poor fisher-girl, who had nothing but a rare dower of beauty. It was intensely disappointing, and a grief of no ordinary kind for Sir Archibald Grant. He slept very little, and rose before the usual rising time. Throwing on a dressing-gown, he went into his wife's room. Tender,

considerate, thoughtful in every particular for those he loved, he had feared to disturb his wife's sleep in the early morning, and even now he was in no haste to see her. Perhaps he felt that they had no very pleasant matters to discuss.

Lady Grant was up also, sitting by her dressing-room fire, with a cup of tea on the basket-table at her side.

'Dearest,' she said, outstretching both her hands, 'I am so glad to see you back.'

'And I to come, my darling,' said Sir Archie fondly, as he stooped to kiss the fair cheek of the wife he still loved with all the tenderness of youth. They were very happy these two; not the shadow of a cloud had ever come between them.

'Do sit down, Archie, and let me give you some tea. Lisette has just brought it up. Isn't the fire cosy?' she asked brightly. 'There is never a morning at St. Veda's not chilly enough for a fire here. I suppose the north exposure makes it cold. I heard you come, but I fell asleep very soon. Mrs. Hewitt told me she was to be up.'

'She was, faithful soul. We had a cold drive, I can tell you, Lilian.'

'Archie has gone to bed, I suppose.'

'Yes, and will be sound asleep,' said his father, with a smile. 'The boy has no care yet, though I fear he is making it for himself. He has disappointed us, Lily.'

'Yes,' said Lady Grant briefly, and put her hand up to her eyes, for her colour rose a little. She was sensitive, and she felt herself not without blame where Annie was concerned. 'He has told you, then?'

'Yes, this morning, before we crossed the Border. It is a fearful disappointment for me, wife; I could not hide it. We have been very indiscreet about the girl. We might have thought that it was impossible for our hot-headed boy to be so much with a winsome girl like Annie, and not fall in love with her; but the difference in their station might have been a safeguard.'

'I have often had misgivings, Archie; but I trusted Annie. She is not a common girl.'

'No, certainly not. Is she here, Lily?'

'Here? No,' said Lady Lilian with an effort.

'I thought Archie said so. He expects her to be here. Did you not promise to bring her up? The boy seems to have got it into his head that she is not well treated in the Haven.'

'That is all nonsense, as I told him. I *did* send for her, but, Archibald, she has gone away from Orr's Haven.'

'Gone away! Where?'

'No one knows. It will be a relief to tell you, dearest, for I have been very wretched,' cried Lady Grant tremblingly. 'Like you, I was terribly disappointed when Archie told me, and I let him see it. I told him it was madness, that he was taking a step he would live to regret. But I promised to bring Annie up when he asked me. I will tell you why, Archibald. It was that I might talk to her. I hoped she would be more amenable to reason. There is none in him.'

'No, he is in love,' said Sir Archie briefly.

'She came up,' continued Lady Grant, 'yesterday morning, and we had a long talk. I laid the matter very plainly before her. I showed her that it would not be a wise marriage for either of them, and left her to choose.'

'And did you say she had gone away from the Haven?'

'Yes. It seems she went off by the South train yesterday afternoon, while her mother was at Eyemouth. It is most extraordinary. I have blamed myself, Archibald, a good deal, and yet I am sure I was quite kind. Nobody could have been kinder. You believe, dear, that I would not willingly hurt anybody's feelings. I thought it my duty to tell her my opinion of the marriage. It is not always wise to let young people do just as they please.'

'My darling, do I not know you are all that is good and kind?' said Sir Archie quickly. 'How did Annie seem to receive it?'

'She was very calm and quiet; one might almost have thought her quite unconcerned. I told her what we wished and hoped for our son, and pointed out that a good marriage was very essential to the success of his career. I was not harsh, Archibald. I am very sorry for Annie Erskine, and I love her too. She is a sweet girl.'

'And she has gone away? Mrs. Hewitt told me Ethel had been down at the Haven most of yesterday. The skipper's folk will be in a terrible way.'

'He is, and Adam. Janet is very hard and cold about it. I rather think she has been harsh with Annie of late, too. How selfish we are, Archibald! She is disappointed in her hopes for her son too, and has visited it on poor Annie.'

'They do not think any harm has befallen her?'

'Oh no. She left a letter for the skipper, which gave him some comfort. He was here last night; but I, of course, could not give him much comfort.'

'I am very sorry about this,' said Sir Archie, with a sigh. 'What does the skipper intend doing?'

'Nothing in the meantime. He has an absolute faith in the child, and she has asked him not to seek after her.'

'And will he really not take any steps to discover Annie?'

'Not just now.'

'And what will the boy say, Lily? That will not satisfy him.'

'Our boy? No,' said Lady Grant with a sigh. 'I have been dreading his coming home. He is just a firebrand. He will seek her to the ends of the earth, if need be. Archibald, children are only a care when they grow up and begin to shape a course for themselves.'

'Ours have not given us much anxiety, Lily. The boy is a good boy. He has behaved honourably to Annie Erskine, for which I am deeply thankful.'

'And I also. We are not grateful, I fear, and our pride gives us a deal of trouble. Do you know, I feel sure that if Annie would only come back, I would take her to my heart.'

Sir Archie was silent a moment, hesitating whether to acquaint his wife with the nature of the business which had called him to London. The excitement about Annie had driven that out of his mind for the moment.

'Archibald, have you never wondered about Annie? She is not a common girl. Perhaps if her parentage were traced, she might be found not unworthy to marry a Grant. I do think the Erskines were to be blamed for not making any inquiry at the time.'

'Perhaps. Anyhow, it is too late now. There cannot exist any one deeply interested in her, or all these years would not have been allowed to elapse without the slightest inquiry being made. How long is it? Over twenty years, isn't it?'

'It will be twenty-one in November, on the nineteenth. Do you remember that storm, Archie? Ethel was only a few weeks old, and I was not strong, and very timid about you going down to the rescue work.'

'Ay, I remember it well. There has not been a wilder night at St. Veda's since I came to it. Lilian, has it ever occurred to you what would become of us if any heir of my brother's should turn up to claim the place? I have never spoken of it to you, though it has often been in my mind.'

'No, I have never thought about it,' said Lady Grant, without a ruffle on her fair, calm face.

'Lily, that is what took me to London. A person calling herself the widow of my brother has come home from India with her son. They intend to lay claim to the estates.'

'Archibald!'

'It is true; but I do not think there is any chance of their success, nor do I believe for a moment that they have any claim. I have seen them both, and have consulted Francis Bold. You remember him at our marriage, dear? He laughs at the whole thing; but I believe they intend to take it to court.'

'Archibald!'

Distress, terror, bewilderment sat on Lady Lilian's face.

'If we are turned out of St. Veda's, where can we go? We are penniless. Oh, it would be cruel!'

'Hush, my darling; do not distress yourself. There is no fear. The main proofs are wanting; and I am perfectly convinced in my own mind that the woman I saw yesterday is not my brother's widow. Still the thought that one's right to a place is challenged, is not pleasant.'

'Archibald, everything seems to be going wrong. I have felt for weeks as if some fearful trouble was hanging over our heads,' said Lady Grant helplessly. She could not nerve herself to meet any trial. She was indeed a creature made for the sunshine of prosperity. Sir Archie doubted for a moment his wisdom in telling her; and yet, perhaps, it could not have been kept hidden.

'Do not give way, Lily. I assure you there is no fear. It is only the publicity of a law case which is troubling me now. It is very unpleasant to have one's family history made a public talk. We can talk this all over again, dear. There is the bell, and Archie will be down clamouring for his breakfast.'

As he spoke there was an impatient tap at the dressing-room door.

'May I come in, mother?' said Archie's voice. Father and mother looked at each other, then Sir Archie opened the door.

'Come in, we were just talking of you. You are earlier astir than I expected after your restlessness in the train.'

'How can a fellow sleep in that glorious sunshine? How are you, mamma?' he asked gaily, as he stooped to kiss his mother. 'Is Annie here?'

He asked the question quite unconcernedly, as if there could be no doubt of the answer. His mother had given him her promise, and, of course, he expected its fulfilment.

'No, my boy, Annie is not here. Your father will tell you what has happened,' she said, as if weary of the subject.

'Happened! What can have happened?' asked Archie quickly, as he turned to his father. 'What have you to tell me?'

'Your mother has just been telling me, my boy—but you must not make a noise about it—Annie has left Orr's Haven.'

'Left Orr's Haven! What for?'

'Ah! we cannot tell that. Your mother sent for her yesterday, as you desired, and they had a long talk. She went away from her home, it seems, in the afternoon.'

'What did you say to her? Were you not kind?' quoth Archie, almost fiercely, as he turned towards his mother again.

'Yes, I was kind. I told her what I told you, Archibald, that I did not think the marriage would turn out happily. I told her what we had hoped and expected for you, and what would be looked for in your wife. I said to her that whatever she should decide, I should be pleased. She has chosen, and I am quite blameless.'

Archie Grant did not speak for a moment. He remembered the cold haughty tones of his mother's voice that night when he had acquainted her with his wooing. If she had shown that side of her nature to Annie, he did not wonder at the result. He knew Annie so well—her proud, shrinking, sensitive soul could not bear the shadow of reproach! Oh! he had been a fool to leave her to his mother's tender mercies.

'Left the Haven! In heaven's name, where has she gone?'

Sir Archie laid his hand kindly but firmly on his son's shoulder.

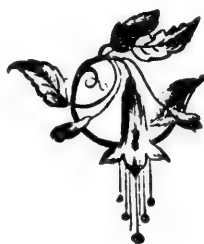
'I think you had better come downstairs with me. This excitement is hurtful for your mother, and I see you are ready to blame her, though she has been so kind. Come downstairs.'

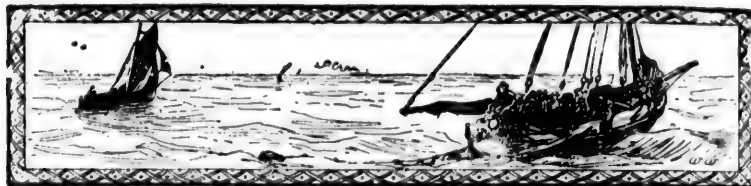
'Not till I know more,' said Archie, shaking off his father's hand. 'When did she leave the Haven?' he added, turning to his mother. 'Was she here yesterday morning? What did you say to her?'

Lady Grant's pride rebelled. 'I will not be questioned so rudely, Archie. I have done too much already for your sake,' she said coldly. 'How can *I* tell why or where she has gone? I am not Annie Erskine's keeper.'

'You promised to be kind to her while I was away!' cried the lad in a great burst of passion. 'Oh, I know how it was. You wrought upon her sensibilities by telling her it would be selfish for her to be my wife. You talked to her till she felt it would be a crime to marry me. Left the Haven? I believe she has not gone far away. She will be found lying on the sands some morning, and her death will lie at our door. Oh, my Annie, my poor, lost darling!'

He turned upon his heel, and ran out of the room. A few minutes later he was making his way with long swinging strides down the low road to the Haven, to seek there some solution of the mystery.






CHAPTER XXIII.

TALKING IT OVER.

A DEEP, dark shadow had fallen on Adam Erskine's household. Not only the shadow caused by the absence of Annie, who, in his eyes, was its brightest ornament; but a cloud had arisen, for the first time in all their married life, between the husband and wife. Adam Erskine was disappointed in his wife. He was an indulgent and tender husband: there were, in these respects indeed, few like him; but he was a just man, and in judging between his wife and his adopted child, he blamed Janet wholly. When he returned from the Castle that night, he uttered no word, good or bad, to her, nor did he acquaint her with any of the items he had learned. As was to be expected, she felt it keenly, but was too proud to ask a single question. Perhaps she was afraid, too; she had never seen her husband so roused. As for Adam the younger, he did not sleep in the house that night, but paced the narrow deck of the *Janet Rae* till morning. Very dark, very bitter, very revengeful were his thoughts. Next day was a curious day, one of the most unhappy the little household had ever experienced. The men folk busied themselves out of doors, about the harbour and the boat, and only came in at meal times. Even then not a word was spoken, except what was absolutely necessary. The name



of Annie, though uppermost in each mind, did not pass their lips. As was to be expected, the disappearance of Annie Erskine from Orr's Haven made a great talk in the place. The skipper seemed unconscious of it, but Adam overheard a fisherman speak slightly of Annie as he passed a group at the pier-head, and with one stroke of his great arm he laid him on the ground.

'That'll teach you, Pate Pourie, to keep yer leein' tongue in yer mouth,' he said, in a voice of thunder, as he passed on.

Altogether it was a weary, weary day that in the skipper's house, and the heart of Janet Erskine was like lead in her breast. The estrangement from her husband and son was bitter as gall to her; but she only blamed Annie more and more, and took no blame to herself. She grudged the loving memory the girl had left behind in their hearts. She told herself bitterly that, though death should cut her off, she would not be so bitterly mourned. She marvelled much that neither the skipper nor Adam had gone off in search of Annie; they seemed to have no such intention, but made their preparations for another voyage in the *Janet Rae* as if nothing had happened. They intended to sail with the afternoon tide on the third day after Annie had disappeared.

Janet Erskine was getting the breakfast ready on Friday morning when Archie Grant's shadow darkened the window, and presently he strode into the house. She never looked at him, but continued setting the table precisely as if he were not there.

'What have you done with Annie, Mrs. Erskine?' he asked in that hot way of his; but she gave him no answer, good or bad. Her face was perfectly inscrutable, but her mouth seemed long and thin and determined-looking, as if it would keep its own counsel.

'Can't you answer me, woman?' he asked angrily, forgetting his usual courtesy.

'Yes, I'll answer you,' she said sourly. 'You can ask them

that drove her away. You spoiled her among you at the Castle. If you care anything about her, and are vexed about her running away, you can thank yourselves. I have nothing to say to you, sir. I did my duty by the girl, and she has brought disgrace on an honest household. I never wish to hear anything about her again.'

'Disgrace! What disgrace? How dare you speak about her before me in that way? She was a thousand times too good for you. You felt her superiority, and were jealous of her. I'll never forgive you, Janet Erskine, for the way you treated her. We are all to blame. I don't deny it—my mother among the rest. But Annie never was anything but a dutiful daughter to you, and you ought to have made her happy. She could not help not caring for your son.'

'I'm in my own house, sir, and I need not listen to you unless I please. I have no more to say about her. She has chosen to turn her back on us. Let her go, say I. I have only one hope, that she may learn in the hard world to be grateful for the blessings she had here.'

Archibald Grant was silent, but he bit his lips to keep back words which he felt ought not to be uttered to any woman. But she tried him sorely. She was so righteous in her own estimation, so hard on Annie, it was more than he could bear.

'If you've any more to say, you can seek the men folk. They're down at the boat,' she said, with a grim smile. 'They'll go in with you. They think it all my blame, and you can enjoy yourselves calling me names if you like. It won't do *me* any harm.'

At any other time Archie would have laughed at that speech, but he heard it in grim silence, and strode out of the house.

He stood a moment in the doorway looking about the familiar hamlet, seemingly oblivious of the looks being cast at him by the fisher folks. They were all on the *qui vive* about the Erskines, and the sight of the young Laird at the skipper's

door seemed another link in the chain. Some of them, of course, believed, and had indeed said, that only the young Laird could tell where Annie was; and yet, if that was the case, why should he come so boldly to the skipper's house? The thing seemed to grow more mysterious and complicated every day. After standing for a moment at the door, Archie suddenly caught sight of the two Adams on board the *Janet Rae*, and immediately turned his steps down the pier. He walked with his head down, and did not pay any heed to the greetings the men gave him as he passed. His mind was entirely filled with one absorbing thought.

The *Janet Rae* was anchored close to the pier-head, from which a single plank stretched to the deck. The young Laird crossed it, and the moment Adam the younger saw him he stepped from his own boat on board the *Cynthy*, and from thence on to the pier, and turned his steps to the village. The folks, watchful of every trifling incident, saw his action, and shook their heads. They even whispered to each other that a darker calamity than was dreamed of might arise out of Annie Erskine's disappearance. It would not be the first time two men had quarrelled over one woman. Of course the very thought of such a thing was a delicious tit-bit of excitement for the Haven folks, to whom gossip was as the very wine of life.

Archie did not notice Adam's action. It was the skipper he more particularly wished to see.

The skipper lifted his head from the ropes with which he was busy, and gravely inclined his head. It seemed to Archie Grant that this had turned Adam Erskine into an old, careworn man.

'You know what I've come for, skipper. I want Annie. She is as dear to me as she is to you. Have you no clue?' he said earnestly.

The skipper shook his head, and turned his eyes seawards a moment. Archie Grant saw the muscles of his mouth contract,

and knew how deep was the sorrow in the old man's heart. He sat down beside him on the ropes, and for a moment there was nothing said. There was a silent sympathy between them, however, of which each was peculiarly conscious.

'Will you not speak to me, skipper? It was for my wife I wanted Annie. There was no other thought in my head,' said the young Laird with an earnest humility which was indescribably touching.

'I ken; the Lord bless ye, lad,' said the skipper, with heaving breast, and he stretched out his arm. Then the two men clasped hands; for the time the difference in rank was merged in the bond of a common sorrow.

After a little the skipper began to speak, keeping his eyes down bent on the knots of the torn net with which his fingers played.

'This is an ill day for me and mine, Maister Airchie. It seems there hae been ongauns in the house I kent naething about. It seems that my Janet,' here the skipper hesitated a moment, for it was no ordinary trial for him to blame his wife. 'It seems that for a time back she hasna been actin' a mither's pairt to the bairn. It's an ill thing, my lad, when a man has to judge atween wife and wean. Janet forgot that only the Almichty has the plannin' o' folk's lives. She maun learn that the Almichty an' her are twa different folk, an' I see it's an ill lesson for her to learn; but aiblins it may dae the 'ooman guid.'

Archie Grant could scarcely repress a smile at the quaintness of the skipper's expression.

'I have heard nothing about it yet, skipper. I came home fully expecting to find Annie at St. Veda's. Tell me all you know.'

'That was a mistak', Maister Archie, a fell mistak', said Adam Erskine slowly. 'What for could ye no' leave the bairn alane? Ye kent that she couldna but draw till ye if ye socht her,' he added, looking almost mournfully at the hand-

some face of the young man. 'Ye maun hae kent, too, that it could be naething but a grief to yer folk. It was a wunner to me that Lady Grant wasna waur than she was. She wasna ill to the bairn; she only telt her what was true, an' what I wad hae telt her mysel' had I kent in time. There's nae mystery in the thing to me ava. Annie had a bit fine prood speerit, an', besides, she believed she was daein' richt. I canna blame her, I dinna blame her. I lo'e her a thoosan' times mair nor I did, an' maybe I made an idol o' her. Janet aye said that anyway. Doubtless I need this bit whummle o' vexin' too.'

'You don't seem greatly concerned about her, skipper,' said Archie, almost wonderingly. 'Do you know that she is safe that your mind is so easy?'

'I ken nae mair than ye'll ken when I let ye see her letter, an' that's no' muckle,' said the skipper, and putting his hand into the inside pocket of his jersey, he handed out the precious letter to the Laird. It was a proof of his faith in and sympathy for the young man that he allowed him to read those words, which were now engraven on his own heart. With what eagerness, painful eagerness indeed, did Archie's eyes scan these trembling lines which Annie's own hands had penned!

'You're right, it isn't much,' he said quickly, for his heart was wrung by the pathos of the letter. 'Well, what are you going to do? We may as well know what we each intend, as we have the same end in view.'

'I'm no' gaun to dae naething except wait,' said the skipper quietly. 'Ye see what she says. She promises to send word if she needs onything, an' that nae news 'ill be guid news. In the meantime I'll dae naething.'

'But, skipper, she knows nothing about the world. She wrote that out of sheer ignorance. Poor darling, she did not know to what hardships she might be going. Waiting will not satisfy me, I tell you.'

'Oo, but I can wait brawly, an' lippen to the Lord. He'll

tak' care o' the bairn. What are ye feared for? She has the grace o' God in her heart, an' she's no' ane to stick. She'll get on, never fear. I'm no' for her back to the Haven till there's a young leddy at the Castle.'

'There will never be anybody there in that capacity except Annie herself,' was the prompt reply. 'Would you not give her to me, skipper? I thought I was aye a favourite of yours.'

'So ye are, lad, so ye are; an' I'll tell ye this muckle for yer comfort. There's no' ane livin', no' excepting my ain Adam, that I wad quicker gie the bairn till. But because ye're the young Laird, an' she's but Annie Erskine, it'll no' be wi' my coontenance, onless, onless'—

'Unless you are obliged to give it, which will be the case very shortly,' interrupted Archie almost gaily, for the old man's calm, assured tone had greatly raised his spirits. 'I promise you that Annie will be at the Castle within a week, and that the bells will be ringing for us before the corn's all in between this and Berwick.'

The skipper shook his head. 'Weel, weel, we'll see. Ye are a fell determined set, you Grants, but ye'll maybe find yin as determined,' he said shrewdly. 'If Annie has made up her mind that she'll no' hae ye, she'll no'. Ye'll find that, my man.'

'Would you wager on it, skipper?' asked the Laird, with a light laugh, as he sprang up.

'I dinna wager, my man; an', besides, weemen folk, as a rule, are no' to be coonted on. There's nae law to guide them. They're like the wind, that blaws whaur it listeth. But I believe I micht be certain about Annie.'

'I don't, but we'll see. And is that all you know? Have you never heard anything about her movements?'

'I ken a wee thing mair nor what's wrote, but I'm no' gaun to tell ye, lad,' answered the skipper quietly. 'If ye are as anxious as ye look, ye'll no' be lang o' findin' oot a' I ken in

the same way. But it's true that I dinna ken whaur she is, an' I doot it'll be a gey while or ye ken either.'

'We'll see,' said Archie significantly. He drew himself up as he spoke, as if he could do or dare anything for Annie. To youth and love all things seemed possible. Hope had already taken the edge off the bitter blow Archie Grant had received. But he was yet to taste the deep and peculiar bitterness of hope deferred.

'Well, skipper, I begin my search to-day. You won't wish me success then?'

The skipper looked up at the bright, manly face, and a moisture dimmed his eyes. It was impossible *not* to wish him God-speed. That look told Archie that in his heart of hearts the skipper prayed for his success.

So with another handshake they parted; and as Adam Erskine watched the fine figure stride manfully along the pier, he whispered to himself, 'God bless him an' Annie! If it be the Lord's will that they shall be man an' wife, I canna keep it back. He's as worthy o' her as she is o' him. God bless them baith!'

Then he fell to dreaming of the future, and watched the softly flowing tide, quite forgetful of the spread table and the injured wife at home. Perhaps, after all, Janet Erskine was *not* getting justice in these dark days from her husband and son. Everything was forgotten, nothing was of any consequence, for the sake of Annie. Full of new energy and hope, Archie Grant strode away round the shore to the stair in the cliff. He had learned all he wished to know, and now must take prompt action. Perhaps it was the soothing murmur of the incoming tide, and the influence of his surroundings, which were fraught with memories of Annie, but he felt his pace slackening and a dreaminess of mood steal over him in the deep solitude of the place. Memories of the past thronged upon him; all of Annie, who had lived in such constant communion with the sea. How she had loved it since her very

babyhood! He could recall bygone days, when as children they had played on the shore, and how fearless she had been of the waves even in their wildest mood. If she had sought a home in the city, how would she live, he wondered, pent by stone and lime, with nothing to hear and see but the noise and strife of the streets? Her heart would break, he knew, for all she had so loved.

These thoughts were lying upon his heart like a deep flood as he turned suddenly round the jagged edge of the cliff, and saw Adam Erskine the younger standing at the steps, with his arms folded over his broad breast, and his dark brows bent on the ground. Beyond a doubt he was waiting for him, but not the slightest misgiving touched the heart of Archie Grant.

'Halloa, Adam!' he said in the old familiar fashion; 'are you waiting for me?'

'Ay, I'm waitin'; I'm for a word wi' ye,' replied Adam, almost sullenly, and he stood up. Looking at him straight with keen, observant eye, Archie Grant saw a great, great change on the face of his old friend.

'Well, what is it?'

'I want to know what ye hae dune wi' oor Annie?' asked Adam then, and his voice shook with the intensity of the passion pent in his breast.

The significance of the question was not to be mistaken. The hot blood of the Grants swept redly to the cheek of the young Laird. His lip curled, and without deigning a reply, he passed by the fisherman's son with a haughty contempt, as if his questioning were beneath his notice. Then Adam Erskine's brow grew dark as night. He clenched his fist, and as he looked after the graceful, retreating figure, an oath, the first he had ever uttered in his life, passed his lips.



CHAPTER XXIV.

HOPE DEFERRED.

THE days went by. The *Janet Rae* made her short voyages between Orr's Haven and the fishing grounds; Janet Erskine kept the house as usual, and if she felt the strange solitude in which she was so much left, she made no sign. There was apparently no difference in the life of the Erskines; outside folk made a general marvel that there was so *little* difference. But outsiders do not, as a rule, know all. They can only judge from what is to be seen, and are not aware of the strength of the under-currents. There was a great difference in the Erskine household—the difference between night and day. Strange as it may seem, for three weeks the name of Annie, which had once been like the sweet lilt of the lark to the ears of these three, was never mentioned. Life went on; the daily, hourly routine knew no change, but the shadow remained. Sitting in the lengthening evenings by the fireside, the skipper's brow would grow dark and his eyes dim. Sometimes even his lips would quiver, and Janet, watching from under her bent brows, would feel her heart beat with a hungry, passionate pain, for she knew he was thinking of the lost bairn with a love such as he had never given to her, the wife of his bosom. She was wrong there. Adam Erskine loved his wife with that deep, true, if

undemonstrative affection which has something solemn in it, but he felt estranged from her so long as she still cherished her resentment against Annie. He was waiting for a touch of penitence or regret to unlock the floodgates of his own soul. As for Adam the younger, he was a grief to his parents, he was so sadly changed. Moody, irritable, ill-natured, indeed, had he become; so great was the burden weighing on his spirit that he had absented himself for three successive Sabbaths from the kirk ordinances, and, instead, roamed the braes or went off in a little boat round the shores, as was the manner of the careless and ungodly in the place. So the sorrow which had fallen on the house wrought in its own fashion in each separate soul.

During these three weeks Archie Grant had been a great deal away from home. The skipper knew that he was making every inquiry for Annie; but he did not know that every means had been employed without success. She had been traced to Berwick, but whether she went north or south after that, no man knew. Simple though she was, she had managed her escape very well.

The skipper was sitting on the bench at the door one evening in the gloaming, smoking his pipe, when the young Laird came striding down the School Brae. The old man looked at him with keen interest, but saw from his face that he had no good news to tell. He felt grieved for him, he saw that it was a matter on which the lad's heart was set.

'Good evening, skipper,' said Archie, and his voice seemed to have lost its cheerful ring. 'All well?'

'Fairly. Hoo's yersel', sir? Sit doon.'

Archie nodded and took the other end of the bench. The door was wide open and the kitchen door ajar. Janet, sitting knitting by the fire, could hear every word.

'Well, skipper, I can't do any more. Annie's lost, apparently. I believe she never left the Haven alive,' he began gloomily.

'Wheesht, lad ; that's stuff an' nonsense. The bairn wasna sue far left to hersel,' said the old man reprovingly, as he knocked the ashes from his pipe.

'Well, what am I to think ? I have left no stone unturned, I have had the best advice, the cleverest skill, and it has availed nothing. She has only been traced to Berwick, and there is a wide world beyond that.'

'Ay, is there. Ye had nae answer, then, to ony o' yer advertesments?'

'No, but she might not see them. What do you think of it now, skipper?'

'A wunnerfu' peace has settled doon on my mind,' said the old man in his quiet way. 'I hae never frettit muckle after her ; for, some way, I hae felt my prayers for the bairn answer, though I hae nae sign. Maister Archie, prayer is truly the anchor o' the soul.'

'I wish it was *my* anchor, then,' said the young man impetuously ; 'for I am in torment night and day about her. I picture all sorts of awful things. I am amazed, astounded at you, Captain Erskine.'

The old man smiled, and pointed with his forefinger straight out to sea. It was heaving tumultuously in the rising night-wind, and the waves dashing against the cliffs made a hollow roaring suggestive of strength and passion held in curb.

'He hauds the sea in the hollow o' His hand, my man, an' yet no' a sparrow can fa' to the grund without His kennin',' he said simply. 'Can He no' look after yin bit bairn for you an' me?'

It was a beautiful lesson in simple faith ; a rebuke, indeed, to the hot, restless, young heart by the old man's side. If he who loved Annie with a father's love could so leave her in a higher hand, surely she must be safe.

'You are a good man, captain ; you have taught me many a lesson,' he said impulsively. 'But I don't know what to do about this. I feel as if I had no interest in life.'

'You maunna feel like that, my man. Annie's only ae thing, though I grant ye she's worth the missin'. But ye maun think on a' yer ither mercies. Life's a' afore ye, Maister Airchie. Supposin' ye should never see her again, ye maun keep yer coorse straicht aheid. We're expectin' great things frae the Laird's son.'

'Everything seems to be going wrong,' said the young man gloomily. 'Ethel has been very ill to-day and yesterday, and Dr. Maurice is looking very grave, I can see. Then there is the new trouble which is harassing my father very badly. Don't you notice him looking worried?'

'I said to Janet yesterday, efter we cam' oot o' the kirk, that Sir Airchie was gettin' to look awfu' auld like. Syne we coonted up an' fand he wasna that auld. But whatten new trouble is't? We've never heard a cheep about it.'

'No, I daresay not. But everybody 'll know soon enough. A claimant has turned up for St. Veda's, skipper.'

'A claimant! What kind o' a claimant?'

'A lady and her son have come home from India claiming to be the widow and son of my father's brother who went to India so many years ago. You'll remember the story.'

'Remember it! Did I no' mind yer uncle hissel', my man? A daft laddie, just siccan ye used to be yersel', but a kinder or truer heart never drew the breath o' life. We thoct the auld Laird ower hard on the laddie for stannin' by the lassie he lo'ed.'

'Ay, well, his widow and son have turned up to claim their own.'

'He's deid, then?'

'Yes, three-and-twenty years ago.'

'Three-and-twenty years ago! An' whaur hae they been a' this time?'

'That's it. My father is convinced that they are impostors.'

'Eh, mercy me, d'ye say sae? That the deil should pit sic

wickedness into onybody's heid as to gar them seek what's no' their ain. Ye hae seen them, then?'

'Yes, that was the business which took us to London.'

'And what d'ye think yersel', Maister Airchie? Is there ony look o' the Grants aboot the lad?'

'None that I can see, and my father says that the lady bears no resemblance to the description my uncle gave him of Miss Seton. Of course he never saw her.'

'Then what are ye gaun to dae?'

The skipper was intensely interested. For the time being, his own trouble was swallowed up in concern for the Castle folk. Janet, too, in the kitchen was listening breathlessly to every word. Had Archie known of her presence, he would have lowered his voice, or withheld his confidence from the skipper till a more convenient season. It was not to be wondered at, perhaps, that he should regard Janet Erskine with dislike and aversion.

'We are waiting to see what they are going to do. But the probability is that there will be a case before the Court of Session.'

'Eh, man, that's a peety, a great peety. I wadna like to see yer name into every common mouth. It'll no' be pleasant for ony o' ye, Maister Airchie.'

'That is what my father feels, but what can we do? If they think their claim can stand the test of investigation, we need not grudge them the chance. It is the raking up of the old stories my father does not like. One's family history is made public enough by local gossip without having it printed in the newspapers.'

'Weel, I'm fell vexed to hear a' that, my lad; but ye needna fear, for justice will be dune; an' if they be yer uncle's folk guid an' weel, naebod's gaunna grudge them their ain, barin' them that lo'e sae weel them that's i' the Castle the neo,' said the skipper with emotion.

'We dare not think about it. It will kill my father to

give up St. Veda's now,' said Archie quickly. 'Just think of it. He is a very poor man; he has absolutely nothing to fall back upon, and then there is my mother and Ethel.'

'Dinna speak o't. It'll no' bear speakin' o', ' answered the skipper. 'But if the warst should come, you'll pit yer shoulther to the wheel, Maister Airchie, an' show the grit that's in ye. They'll never want as lang as they hae you an your strong arms to fa' back on.'

'That's true; but all the same I mean to fight for my rights. I can't believe that we have no right to the place,' cried Archie, as he sprang to his feet. 'Well, skipper, I must away home. This is all in confidence, mind. Not another soul knows outside our own family.'

'Nor winna frae me, Mr. Airchie; dinna be feared. I'll no' even let on to the wife. Na, na; if it's to gang to law, we'll be sick o' the thing afore its settlet, an' there'll be plenty said about it, maybe ower muckle. I'll dauner along the road a bit wi' ye; are ye gaun by the shore?'

'The tide will be up, I doubt, and I see Adam at the other side of the harbour. Adam and I are not pulling in the same boat just now, skipper.'

'I see that, sir. Adam's lyin' heavy on my heart. He hasna taen this trouble like a man,' said the skipper in a melancholy voice. 'I've never said a word yet, but I'm gaun to open oot on him some day sune. He's ower like his mither i' the temper, I doubt. Hielant anger like Hielant peats burns unco lang. Ye hav'na haen ony words, I houp?'

'No. He said something to me one morning I didn't like, but I gave him no answer, good or bad. I don't want to see him. My temper's none of the best; and when two fires meet, you know'—

'Ay, there'll be a lowe,' said the skipper, with a faint smile. 'I'm gled ye hae the sense to keep awa' frae him i' the noo. The deil's gotten in grips wi' him I see, an' it's gaun to be a geyan sair battle. But, as I said, I'll no' let him alane

muckle langer. Eh, man, the auld days when ye were a' weans thegither, were better nor they. This love's an unce business. It plays mischief among frien's. But we're no' gaun to let oor speerits doon a' thegither. We'll git the knots oot o' the threids yet. Just bide or I licht my pipe, will ye? I needna bid ye come in.'

Janet slipped into the room before her husband entered the kitchen; but when he left the house she came back to the kitchen window, and watched them out of sight.

As she stood there in the semi-darkness, her face sharply outlined against the fading light from the west which fell across the little window, she looked like an old, old woman. Her face was all lines and seams, brought there by the bitterness of her heart. It must not be thought she had not suffered since Annie went away. She was a woman of strong feelings, and was sensitive even to slight vexations. A lingering love for Annie was in her heart. There were times, indeed, when in the deep and unbroken solitude of the house, her longing for her became a passion hardly to be borne; then there were grief, anxiety, harassing thought about her son, whom this trouble had so sadly changed, as well as sorrow for the continued estrangement of her husband. He was not less kind, less considerate, less mindful, but there *was* a difference; an undefinable barrier, only perceptible to the keen vision of love, had arisen between them. I believe that in the past month Janet Erskine had really suffered a punishment adequate to her sin. For her treatment of Annie had been a sin; for is not selfishness in its worst form a sin which creates half the unhappiness in the world? But as yet suffering had only hardened her. She was still righteous in her own eyes, and smarting under a sense of injustice and wrong. Perhaps nothing short of a great sorrow would break down that strong wall of pride and self-righteousness and hardness of heart.

She had been amazed at the story she had heard the young Laird tell the skipper at the door. She remembered the elder

son of the old Laird, though she had only seen him once. This romance of his marriage had happened very shortly after she had come a bride to Orr's Haven. Looking back on these old times, she began to think over her own memories; thoughts came to her of little Elsie, of whom she had made an idol, and whose loss had so nearly cost her her reason; she recalled the dreary, awful winter which had intervened between little Elsie's death and the night of the wreck, which had given her a child to fill her loved one's place. It had seemed to her then as if the little waif had been given in response to her despairing prayers. How she had loved the child—nay, worshipped was a fitter word! And now, where was that old love, where the child who had filled the hungry void in her heart? Her bosom heaved, her proud wide mouth quivered, as these memories shook her.

'Annie, my bairn!' she whispered, in an intense, agitated voice. For the moment her pride was broken, nothing but tenderness and longing filled her heart. But she grew calmer again thinking of later years, and became jealous, even in thought, over the idea that the child she had taken to her motherly breast on that awful night had supplanted her in the affections of her own husband and son. It was for Annie's sake the skipper had changed towards her, it was for Annie's sake that Adam's life had become a burden to him, and that he went about a listless, morbid, melancholy man. So her anger began to burn again against poor Annie. She was to be pitied, torn as she was by so many conflicting emotions. It grew quite dark in the kitchen. She drew down the blind, lit the lamp, and then, mindful of her duty, she took a candle to go up to the garret for some of the fishing gear which would be wanted for the morrow.

A curious thought came to her as she ascended the trap-stair. One-and-twenty years ago she had laid in safe hiding the box which had come ashore with Annie and her mother. During that long period of years she had been visited more

than once by a slight curiosity to know the contents of that box. But she had never touched it, her eyes had never even looked upon it since the day she had laid it in its hiding. Perhaps it was not unnatural that she had even come to regard it with a species of superstition. She shut the garret door, set an old plank against the little storm window, and then approached the far corner where the box with its secret lay hid. She was a curious mixture of weakness and strength, this woman; her limbs actually trembled as she peered with the candle into the recess. During the long years the spiders had been busy, and had made a network so close and thick over the box that for a moment she imagined it was gone. She saw the outline of the casket, however, and sweeping aside the cobwebs took it her hand. Then she set down the candle on an old trunk, seated herself beside it, and wiping the box with the corner of her apron opened the lid. A faint, sweet, old perfume greeted her, as her fingers touched the papers on the top. The contents were all intact; the sandalwood box had done its duty and kept its secret well. She hid the papers on her lap first, and took up the locket and chain which her own hands had removed that winter morning from the dead girl's neck. She opened the spring, and looked with keen interest at the face photographed within. It seemed strangely familiar; where had she seen that bright yet earnest face before? She closed it quickly, for the sunny eyes seemed to reproach her, and then she took up the little trinkets lying below. They belonged by right to Annie; she knew she had no business with them, and yet she had never coveted them for herself. She wanted to look into the papers, but a curious feeling, which was almost dread, withheld her for a space. But at length with a bold effort she unfolded one which lay at the top, and by the flickering light of the candle began to read. And she sat there holding it before her, as if turned to stone, until the candle flickered in its socket and went out, leaving her in total darkness.



CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECRET IN THE GARRET.

THE first paper which Janet Erskine's eyes fell upon that night was the certificate of marriage between Archibald Orr Grant and Annie Forbes Seton, which took place in Edinburgh in the winter of 1846. In a moment of time the whole matter was made absolutely clear to her, and involuntarily a deep groan escaped her set lips. It had given her an awful shock. She recovered herself after a little, and leaving the box on the trunk top, groped her way downstairs for another candle. While in the kitchen she took the precaution to turn the key in the outer door. She did not wish to be surprised at her occupation in the garret, and could easily explain the locked door by saying she was busy upstairs, and wished to guard against any one coming in. She set the new candle down, and took the box with its contents once more in her lap. As she expected, the next document was the certificate of the birth of the child, Annie Forbes Orr Grant, at Tanjore, in the presidency of Madras.

Having read that, Janet Erskine laid it aside, and deliberately untied the blue ribbon which bound the few letters together. No love letters had passed between Archibald Grant and his wife before marriage, and those which Janet Erskine's fingers now held with no very reverent touch had

been written in India, when he had had occasion to leave her for a time on business.

But though written from husband to wife, they were love letters in the truest sense of the word, for they breathed a deep and abiding tenderness, which showed that Archibald Grant had never repented of his choice. Janet Erskine read every one through, notwithstanding the fact that they contained no information, nor possessed interest for anybody but the person to whom they had been addressed. They contained only a brief account of his journeying and success in business, and always ending with the most affectionate inquiries for her health and well-being. Uninteresting, foolish, perhaps, in their very lovingness, they might seem to any alien eye,—they had been more precious than words could tell to the heart of Archibald Grant's young wife.

Having read them through, Janet Erskine re-tied them, and laid them aside; then she observed a tiny packet wrapped in tissue paper lying beneath the trinkets. When she opened it out it was only a lock of bright brown hair, the curl Annie Grant had cut from her husband's temple that morning before they buried him on the banks of that Indian river where they had had their home. Hastily Janet Erskine wrapped it in its covering, and laid it in the box. She felt as if it burned her fingers; it had a mute reproach for her. She felt as if the dead were watching her, and asking her what she had done with their child. With careful, methodical hand she replaced the articles one by one in the box, locked it, and with her right hand lying above it on her knee, and the left supporting her cheek, she began to think the whole matter out. A strange complication had arisen. She had heard not an hour ago that a claimant to the Grant estates had just returned from India, and here on her lap lay the simple explanation of the whole matter. Annie was the heiress of St. Veda's. She had only to speak, to walk up to the Castle with this box in her hand, and the shadow of care which was

haunting their hearts, and making Sir Archie old before his time, would be lifted at once and for ever. She looked ahead and foresaw the end of the whole story. Annie would be found; she would marry her cousin; and so there would still be an Archibald Grant in St. Veda's. It was a fine romantic story—just such as might be read in any foolish novel; her lips curled as she thought it out. I cannot think but that the devil presented himself at Janet Erskine's elbow that night. He had not been very far away from her of late, seeing she had given lodgment to jealousy and hatred, which are two of his darling sins. She was a good woman in the main, but seemed to have lost her balance for a time. At least she did not struggle against the temptation which assailed her. She foresaw that if she delivered up the box she would be severely censured for secreting it so long; the story would make a great talk, her name would be in everybody's mouth. They would call her mean, jealous, perhaps even dishonest. Then how completely she would be humiliated in the eyes of Annie herself, the child she had alternately whipped and coaxed and scolded and petted all her days. Annie, who had been her young servant—to become a great lady, the lady of St. Veda's, to whom she would require to be respectful and deferential! The thought was intolerable. She pictured in fancy the airs the girl would give herself, and her pride rebelled. What good would it do, she asked herself, to give up the box, and make a great noise about so little? If Annie could not be found, the discovery of her identity would only make matters more vexatious, and cause more complications to arise. Far better to let well alone. And as for the Grants and their lawsuit, let them fight it out. So the tempter whispered in the ear of Janet Erskine, and as she listened to these whisperings, honour and truth and unflinching principle bowed their heads meekly and retired. She rose, took down the board from the storm-window, and looked out. It was pitch dark, but she could see the white edge of the waves on the shore. She stood

a moment irresolute. There was not a sound to be heard, nor any sign of the return of the skipper or Adam. A sudden impulse possessed her. She ran down-stairs, and, throwing a shawl about her head and shoulders, went out of the house, leaving the door on the latch.

She had the box with her under her arm. Though it had kept its secret so long and so well, the garret was no longer the place for it. It would have been a skeleton in the cupboard to Janet Erskine. She did not hesitate at the door, though she might have done so. Duty said go east, something else said go west, and west she went, guided by the flashing light on the headland of St. Abb's. She was not afraid of meeting any one. The night was fearfully dark, and a chill seemed to be in the air, presaging an autumn storm. It was the end of September now, and the late gales were looked for. October was often a wild month on the stormy eastern coast.

She was very sure of the upland path, or she might have lost her footing; a shower had made the sand slippery, and there were many ruts and rough places on the path. But she held on her way without stumbling, and reached the top of the beach in an incredibly short space of time. She stood there by the very boulder where Annie had watched the sunrise one memorable morning while battling with her heart's bitterness. A reflection from the lighthouse revealed the solitary figure, which had something weird in its appearance. She was like some night-wanderer, who felt a kinship in the dark, forbidding, mysterious influences of the hour. The sea, a vast expanse of inky blackness, heaved tumultuously; but it was with a strange, silent heaving, which could only be seen and not heard. Its depths were troubled. The waves fretting the cliffs filled the night with their customary hollow roaring; drops of spray fell even on Janet Erskine where she stood. She paid no heed; the sea, in all its moods, was so familiar that it gave her no concern. She took out the box,

lifted a piece of the rock which had crumbled from the cliff, and with a string bound wood and stone firmly together. The sea was about to receive another secret, to have something very precious added to its treasure store ; but it gave no promise that its secret would be kept. She watched it go down swiftly like an arrow through the shining water, swiftly and silently as if ashamed of its downward course. 'That's done,' she said then, and with white face and gleaming eyes turned about and went away home. None had observed her action, she knew, but forgot that what is unseen by human eye is known of God.

She had not been long absent from the house, and found that neither the skipper nor her son had returned. She breathed more freely to find that her absence would not be noticed, and giving the fire a stir, she took out her knitting. Janet Erskine was always knitting. There was a monotony in the routine of her life which used to fret Annie sometimes when she would be longing for a change. The trunk in the garret, indeed, was filled with stockings and socks and garments for underwear, which would never be worn out by the two for whom they were made. All that Janet Erskine did was for herself or those of her own household. Her charities were bounded by the four walls of her own home. She never gave away to the improvident or the needy, but no man knew the extent of the skipper's generous giving. A tenth to the Lord was his standard, and many a year he went beyond it. On that point he would brook no questioning nor advising. Janet had proved that, and all she could do to balance the thing, was to hold in her own hand. It was little wonder she was not beloved in the place : beggars and selling folks knew to avoid the cottage, and none of the Haven bairns had ever eaten a 'jelly piece' spread by Janet Erskine.

She was outwardly perfectly calm as she sat there at her work, but there was a curious tumult raging within. No sooner was the deed done than she wished it recalled. None

could draw a finer distinction between right and wrong than Janet Erskine. The ten commandments had been firmly fixed in her mind when a child at home under the stern supervision of an austere but God-fearing father. The eighth was uppermost in her mind that night. She even made her lips voicelessly shape the words—'Thou shalt not steal.' What had she stolen? She had stolen from Annie her heritage and name, her right to a place of honour in the world, and surely for such a sin she would not be held guiltless.

These thoughts could not make the solitude of her lonely fireside pleasant for her; but she sat on knitting, knitting, knitting, without a sign of mental disturbance visible in her outward demeanour. She had a grand command over herself. Meanwhile the skipper and Adam were not very far away. They had met on the School Brae, as the skipper was returning from giving the young Laird a convoy to the Castle gates.

'Hulloa, Adam, my man!' cried the skipper cheerily. 'Stravaigin' as usual. Can ye no' bide by the fireside, lad? I'm sure ye get plenty o' the open air.'

'There's no' muckle pleasure i' the hoose noo,' retorted Adam a trifle sullenly, and would have passed on, but his father took him by the arm.

'Na, na, lad; I'm for a word wi' ye,' said the skipper. 'I've been gaunna speak this while. We'll just stap on to the gairden gate. Noo, I want to ken what ails ye. Div ye no' think I miss Annie as muckle as you do? an' ye dinna see me gaun on like a fule.'

Adam never spoke.

'No' only like a fule, but in a sinfu' way. Adam, hae ye nae ither mercies to mind on, lad? Ye'll maybe tempt Providence till He gie's ye something waur to greet about.'

Adam pulled himself free of his father's touch with an impatient gesture, but he spoke never a word till they reached the garden gate. They passed through it, the skipper shut it,

and then they stood a moment in silence. The air was very still about them in the dark, starless night, and it was laden with the faint, sweet perfume of the white rose leaves which the first of the autumn winds had swept in a shower to the ground. There was not a single bloom left on the branch overhanging the gate. The skipper's hand touched that branch with a tender finger. It was the tree Annie had loved.

'Hae ye naething to say, Adam?' he asked quietly.

'That was the young Laird doon the nicht again. What did he want? He has wrocht eneuch mischief in the Haven already. Let him bide awa' afore I lay my hand on him,' said Adam, with a subdued passion which amazed his father.

'Adam, be cautious what ye say to tak' awa' a fellow-cratur's character,' he said sternly. 'What hae *you* against the young Laird? Naething, except that he won the love ye coveted. Eh, my man, strive against yer evil passions, or they'll get the upper haund. I thocht ye wad hae haen mair grace than that.'

'Do you really believe that he kens as little aboot Annie as he pretends?' asked Adam, with incredulous scorn.

'I ken brawly when a man tells me the truth an' when a lee. Had Annie been here, she wad hae been the Laird's wife or this time. I say to him I dinna want him to find her oot, but were I honest wi' mysel' I wad say different. He's a true, honest, manly chap, the young Laird, and I'm prood that he should think sae muckle o' my bairn.'

Adam gave an impatient exclamation, and brought his hand down with force on the post of the gate.

'He's blinded you, I see; but he shall answer to me about Annie yet, or my name's no' Adam Erskine.'

'Adam!' The skipper's voice trembled with its very solemnity. 'I doot, my lad, that there's something in your heart no' faur short o' murder. Gang doon on your knees the nicht afore ye sleep, an' pray for strength to staund against temptation, or I doot ye'll fa'. Eh, my son, this is waur, far waur,

for me to thole than Annie gaun awa', and what *that* was is kent only to my Maker.'

The old man's composure failed him. He leaned his arms on the little gate where Annie had lingered to say her last farewell to her home, and bent his grey head very low. The lips of Adam Erskine the younger twitched in the darkness; he was nearly conquered. The melancholy, moody, vengeful man, whose presence had seemed to cast a dark shadow wherever it fell, was not the real man; and the old, loving, true, unselfish heart would yet assert itself above the poisonous passions which had for a time made it their abode.

'D'ye really believe, faither, that he disna ken whaur Annie is?' he asked; and, though nothing could be gathered from his tone, the very repetition of the question showed that he was wavering.

'Adam, as I stand here, I believe that Archibald Grant kens nae mair about Annie than we ken, and, mair, that he wad gi'e his richt haund, ay, an' a' he possesses, to ken whaur she is. He has spent himsel' for three weeks seeking her, an' my heart's wae for him. He has plenty to bear, lad, withoot your ill-will. If ye are the man I tak' ye for, ye'll tell him, the first time ye see him, that ye wranged him. He tell't me ye werena sailin' in the same boat—they were his very words. Ye'll ken best what's been atween ye.'

'There's been naething atween us ava. I asked him what he had done wi' Annie, an' he passed me by as I'd been dirt.'

'I dinna wunner at it. His pride wad flee up. It was a wunner he keepit his haund aff you, lad,' said the skipper sternly. 'Eh, Adam, ye were like brithers ance. Ye ken brawly Annie's no' for *you*. Can ye no' act a man's pairt, an' offer a britherly haund to them that's won her? It wad mak' a man o' ye, lad, the man I wad like to see my son.'

Adam was conquered now.

'I hae been wrang, an' I *will* tell him, faither. God forgie me; ay, there has been murder in my heart.'

He shuddered as he spoke, for the scales had fallen from his eyes, and he saw himself as he was, filled with hatred against a fellow-creature who had never harmed him.

The old man rose up, and his face grew glad in the darkness. They gripped hands by the garden gate. The skipper said, 'God bless ye, my son,' and then they went quietly into the house.

There was a note of gladness in the skipper's voice that night at worship when he read the thanksgiving psalm; and in his prayer he returned thanks for mercy vouchsafed. He was still troubled about Janet, his wife, but his faith was very great. He believed the stony heart would yet be broken,—he could wait and pray.

She seemed to be troubled in mind beyond her wont, for there was a red spot burning on either cheek, and her movements were even more nervous than usual. At the supper-table she broke a tumbler and a plate, a thing which had never happened before within the skipper's knowledge. Her restlessness seemed to follow her in her sleep. He was awakened in the night with her tossing and muttering; and once he made out the words, 'Thou shalt not steal.'





CHAPTER XXVI.

TREASURE TROVE.



ETHEL was again convalescent, and able to be up during the greater part of the day. She was sitting at her window one grey October afternoon looking out at the sea, which tossed grey and troublous under the lowering sky. It had been a dull October, vexed by many gales; the leaves were all stripped from the trees, and lay sodden by heavy rains on the roads.

Ethel Grant had not spent an October at St. Veda's for many years. She had been wont to take flight with the swallows; but though the winds were biting and chill, and the morning frosts nipping and cruel, there had never been a word said about seeking a warmer clime. Although it had never been put in words, each knew the truth, that their hearts clung with a yearning love to St. Veda's, because their life in it as a home might soon have an end.

It had been a sad autumn for castle as well as for cottage, a time of anxiety and depression which it was impossible to shake off. Archie was still searching by fits and starts for his lost love; but she had disappeared as completely and securely out of his ken, as if, like Kilmeny, she had been spirited away to some unseen land.

Ethel's hands were folded on her lap above a volume of

poetry which she had been reading. She was thinking of Annie, and her eyes were full of tears. In spite of the difference in their station, they had loved each other well. She looked frail, but the pinched, drawn look had once more disappeared from the face which so many held dear; her eyes were bright and clear. There were in her whole appearance signs of returning health. The attack had been sharp, brought on by a chill caught standing in an open doorway, but she had had sufficient strength to conquer it, and was daily gaining ground. Presently a smile banished her tears as she saw her father coming up the avenue. He caught sight of her, took off his hat, and waved his hand in greeting. Before long she heard his step on the stair, and he came straight to her room.

'I thought you would have been asleep, pussy, as mamma doubtless is long since,' he said as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

'I do not feel tired. I am very much stronger to-day, papa.'

'You are sure it is real strength, Ethel?'

'Oh yes. I have felt it gaining on me. Shall I tell you what I think, papa, that it has not always been good for me to rush away to grandmamma with the first breath of cold wind. I believe I should have been hardier at home.'

'This winter will test it then, dearest. Your mother and I were talking over it last night. We cannot make up our minds to leave St. Veda's just now.'

'No; I know.'

Ethel's hand closed over her father's with a soft, sympathetic touch.

'I believe I shall grow quite strong and well now, papa. You cannot believe how hopeful I feel.'

'My darling, I am thankful there is one hopeful heart among us. We have been a sorry household of late.'

'Yes; but there will be brighter days, papa. I am sure of

it. I do not think we shall ever have to leave St. Veda's. One seems to know these things by intuition.'

'But the Grant Succession Case will soon be public property, Ethel,' said Sir Archie a trifle gloomily.

'Never mind; right will win the day, and I don't believe even yet that there ever *will* be a case. See if I am not right,' said Ethel gaily. It was almost as if the spirit of prophecy had touched her, as she spoke with such confidence.

'Well, these troubles have made a man of Archie, Ethel. It is an unspeakable satisfaction to me to see him applying himself to preparation for his Parliamentary life. The election will probably take place in April. He talks of making his first appearance before a Berwickshire audience next month.'

'He has not forgotten Annie, papa.'

'No, and will not, I can see. Her disappearance is a strange mystery, Ethel. I sometimes fear that she cannot be alive.'

'Oh, papa, I am sure she is not only alive, but that we shall see her soon,' said Ethel. 'You cannot imagine what problems I work out during my solitary hours. I know that all this trouble will turn out a blessing to us yet.'

'But for your bright, brave spirit, my Ethel, we should all have succumbed during the past dreary months,' said Sir Archie fondly. 'Strange that we should look to you, poor fragile blossom, for comfort and strength.'

'One of the weak things of the world, papa,' said Ethel, with a tremulous smile. 'I am thankful I am not quite useless.'

She had indeed, even in her frail weakness, been a pillar of strength to them all. To her Archie had been able to pour out his heart without restraint, and had been cheered and comforted by her sympathy. She loved Annie too, and never misunderstood anything he might say. But for the blessing of such a sympathizer he could not so well have borne the

trouble which had darkened his life on its very threshold. He was trying to bear it manfully, and to do his duty as it was revealed to him. He knew the desire of his father's heart for him, and strove to fulfil that desire. He did not give himself up to selfish brooding over his sorrow, and in the very striving found comfort and even peace. But, as Ethel said, he had not and never would forget Annie Erskine. The Grants were not fickle. It was 'love once, love for aye' with them; they were true to the heart's core in the 'office and affairs of love.'

'Adam Erskine is downstairs, Sir Archie, wishing to speak to you,' said a servant's voice at the door.

'Old Adam or young Adam?' asked Sir Archie laughingly, as he turned from the window.

'Young Adam, Sir Archie,' was the answer.

'All right. I'll be down presently. Where did you say he was?'

'In the gunroom, Sir Archie,' said the servant, as she withdrew.

'It is not often the Erskines come up. None of them have been here, I think, since Annie went away.'

'No,' said Ethel with a sigh. 'I have been terribly disappointed in Janet, papa. I used to admire her, but now I think her rather terrible. I would be afraid to live with her.'

'Ay, I fancy the two Adams have a curious time of it with her,' laughed Sir Archie. 'Well, I'll go down and see what this important business can be. I'll look up again—if you are not asleep.'

'I shall not be; do come, dear papa,' said Ethel, as her eyes followed him affectionately to the door.

Sir Archie ran downstairs, lightly humming a tune to himself. He always felt cheered and brightened by a few words with Ethel. She had grown more precious, if that were possible, in this time of trial.

'Well, Adam, good-day to you. I was just saying to my

daughter you were great strangers to St. Veda's now,' he said cheerily, as he nodded to the skipper's son. 'Can I do anything for you?'

'No, Sir Archie; it's something which maybe I can dae for you,' said Adam slowly.

'Ay, that's very good. How's your father and mother?'

'Baith weel. I hae brocht something for you to look at, Sir Archie; something which I fand no' an hour syne on the sands at the Kelpie's Cove.'

'Ay, what's that? treasure trove, eh?' said the Laird with a laugh, as he watched Adam unfold something from his handkerchief.

'I hae heard some talk, Sir Archie, aboot an heir turnin' up for St. Veda's,' said Adam slowly, and keeping his great hand spread over what seemed to the Laird to be a little box. 'The sea had the secret like many anither. I lookit into the box sittin' on the rocks, as was natural; but when I saw what it was, I shut it up an' came straicht wi' it to you.'

As he spoke he held out the little sandal-wood case to the Laird with a smile on his face. Adam Erskine knew only half the secret the sea had refused to keep.

Sir Archie, wonderingly, and not without a strange apprehension, took the box, and setting it on the table opened the lid. It was full of papers, discoloured with the salt water, and requiring very careful handling. He opened out the one which lay on the top, and read there some words which brought a mist before his eyes. It was the certificate of his brother's marriage with Annie Forbes Seton.

'Adam! Adam Erskine!' he cried hoarsely; 'this is indeed a find! Did you read this? Do you know what it is?'

'Ay, Sir Archie, that was the yin I looked at. But gang farther doon, there's maybe mair nor ye think.'

Sir Archie became fearfully excited. His hands shook as he lifted out the papers one by one. They still lay in the order in which Janet Erskine had placed them—the certificate

of the child's birth below the marriage lines, and the letters at the bottom, above the trinkets and the lock of hair.

'The child was a girl. *They* are impostors then!' cried Sir Archie. 'But where, in the name of wonder, Adam Erskine, has this thing come from? It looks as if it had been dropped down from heaven.'

'Maybe it has,' replied Adam, with his slow smile. 'It's o' some use to ye, then, Sir Archie?'

'Use! why, my man, it is; will save me all. It will prove that these people who are laying a claim to St. Veda's are impostors,' cried Sir Archie. 'But where can it have come from? At the Kelpie's Cove, did you say you found it?'

'Ay, Sir Archie, lyin' high an' dry amang the drip an' the seaweed. It's been in the water a whilie.'

Sir Archie was silent—because fingers and eyes were busy with the contents of the box. He laid the letters aside, and opened out the little packet containing the bright, brown hair which had been wont to curl about his brother's brow. Then he lifted the locket and chain, opened it, and saw the face revealed within. Adam Erskine saw his emotion, and with his fine delicacy felt that he ought not to be a witness to that meeting between the living and these strange mementoes of the dead.

'I'll gang awa' doon, Sir Archie, then,' he said, taking up his cap; 'an' I'm fella' gied an' prood that I hae been even o' sma' service to ye.'

'Small service, my man! You don't know what that is. Don't go. But perhaps it may be as well. I shall see you later in the day. Good-day, and thank you, Adam, with all my heart.'

'I dinna need thanks; I only brocht ye yer ain, as ony ither honest chield wad dae,' said Adam, his face glowing with satisfaction. 'I'm prood, as I said, to hae dune even sic a sma' thing to serve the Castle.'

So saying, he went his way. Sir Archie, closing the door

and slipping in the bolt, sat down to make a full examination of the treasure trove which had come to him so strangely, and which was of such moment to him. He examined the locket carefully, holding it with tender, reverent hand. No doubt it had been a pledge of love given by his brother to the young wife, for whose sake he gave up so much. It was not an expensive thing, though of good quality and workmanship. A little coronet of rubies shone in the front, while on the plain surface at the back were engraved the combined initials of the husband and wife, and underneath the motto of the Grants.

The other trinkets were of small interest or value—little things which the young husband had bought on different occasions for his wife when away to the towns on business. At the very bottom of the box, under a piece of chamois leather, which Janet Erskine had not thought to remove, there lay yet another folded paper, which was of great moment. It was a letter written by the hand of Archibald Grant's wife, and which explained away some difficulties, and made every link in the chain complete.

'On board the *Cornelian*,

'In the North Sea, *October 1846.*

'I write this in case anything should happen to our vessel, for we are in the midst of a great storm, and I can see that the captain is looking very grave. After I have written this letter, I will place it in the little sandal-wood box which contains all I prize in the world, the proof of my own and my child's identity. I am Annie Orr-Grant, the wife of Archibald Orr-Grant of St. Veda's, Berwickshire, Scotland, who left England three years ago for India, taking me with him. I need not give the particulars of our marriage, because if this ever falls into the hands of my own or my husband's people, they will understand. It is impossible that we can be forgotten so soon. We sailed to India, and on the voyage became acquainted with a gentleman who owns large plantations

up the country. He became very friendly with my husband, and give him the offer of a situation on his estates. We were glad to accept it, as we had no means and no prospects. So we travelled home with him, and were received by his wife with a kindness which I cannot write about. God will bless and reward Robert and Ellen Mathers for their goodness to us. Six months after our settlement at Tanjore my daughter was born, and within a fortnight after, my husband died of fever after three days' illness. On his deathbed he besought me to go home to Scotland, and see that our child got her rights. I write briefly of that fearful time, because if I allow my mind to dwell on it, I should be totally overcome. Our friends did everything for me. I shall never forget their goodness to me. They put me on board a sailing vessel, the captain of which was a friend of their own, and who promised to take care of me and my child. He has done so. I have everywhere met with nothing but kindness since I left my native land. I have a presentiment that I shall never see it again, and I write this for my child's sake; and I pray God to have her in His keeping, and bring her safely to those who will care for her for her father's sake if not for mine.

'My child's name is Annie. My husband would have her called by no other name. He loved it, he said, better than any name on earth. I have only memory to live on now, but I would not give my memories for any other woman's living happiness. My husband give up everything for me, and it is my most precious comfort to remember that he said, when dying, that he would do it again for my sake. If this should ever fall into strange hands, let it be sent to Sir Archibald Grant, St. Veda's, Orr's Haven; or to Mrs. Seton, 42 Northumberland Street, Edinburgh. If my child should ever reach St. Veda's without me, and should not be made welcome by her grandfather, let her be sent to my mother at the last address. I give these directions because I feel that death is not very far off from me, and I also feel that my child will

be saved. I lay her and all my cares upon the mercy of God.

‘ANNIE ORR-GRANT.’

‘October 17, 1849.’

There were tears in Sir Archie's eyes as he read these lines, which in many places were nearly illegible. He gathered up the box and its contents, and went up with hurried steps to his wife's room.

‘Look at these, Lilian, and tell me if you do not see God's hand in this. I have never known anything more wonderful in fact or fiction.’

Lady Grant looked round in amazement, but obeying her husband's excited request, she looked at the papers one by one as he unfolded them to her. She never spoke a word, nor uttered an exclamation even. Surprise kept her spellbound.

‘Wonderful, is it not, Lily? Look at this locket; it has poor Archie's photograph in it, and see the Grant motto on the back.’

Lady Grant took the trinket in her hand, and began to tremble so violently that she had to lean against her husband's arm for support.

‘Archibald, I have seen this before. I remember the sparkle of these rubies quite well. I thought it a curious design.’

‘Impossible, Lily! You may have seen one bearing a resemblance to it. This may have been lying at the bottom of the sea for years.’

‘It may. But I know now where I saw it, Archibald. It was on the neck of Annie Erskine's dead mother that morning after the wreck. Oh, Archibald, do you not see it? It is all as plain as day.’

Lady Grant, overcome by the emotion and excitement of the moment, burst into tears.



CHAPTER XXVII.

ST. VEDA'S HEIR.



NNIE ERSKINE'S mother ?'

The words fell from Sir Archie's lips almost mechanically.

'You are sure of this, Lily ?'

'Perfectly sure.'

'Then where has this box been for twenty-one years ?'

Lady Lilian shook her head.

'Perhaps Janet Erskine will be able to tell you. All I know is that I saw that locket on the dead woman's neck. One does not forget such things, Archibald. Every particular of that morning in the skipper's cottage is as fresh in my memory as if it had been only yesterday. To think that Annie, who has been so badly used among us, should be St. Veda's heiress !'

'We cannot be sure of this, Lilian. It is only a guess. There will have to be the strictest investigation made.'

'Of course, but I know it to be true,' said Lady Grant, with decision. 'I understand now the strange yearning I had over the girl. She was one of us ; the tie of kinship spoke, though we did not hear it. Oh, Archibald, dearest, where can she be ?'

Sir Archie shook his head. The thing was bewildering,

incredible; but in his heart of hearts he knew his wife was speaking the truth.

'What will the children say? Archie will be nearly wild. She must be found, and Archie and she will marry, and so it will all have a beautiful end,' said Lady Grant, with a tender smile. She was pleased to think that her intuition had not been at fault. She had always said Annie was of gentle birth, and she had not been imagining a pretty romance. The reality was ten times more romantic than any novel she had ever read.

'The conviction is growing in my mind, Lily. When I think of Annie now, I remember a curious familiarity of look and manner which used to puzzle me. Poor Archie's child! What a life she has had! and where can she be now?'

Ah, where, indeed! Who would solve that mystery, or restore the lost to those who were seeking her?

'There is a mystery about the box; but that, too, is solvable. After Annie went away, knowing who she was, Janet Erskine was afraid to keep the proofs of her identity in the house, and so threw the box into the sea. She shall be punished for her sin,' said Sir Archie sternly.

'If she has known all these years who was the child she had in her home, she is indeed a wicked woman,' said Lady Grant solemnly. 'She has wronged not only the living but the dead. If she read that letter, and could withstand its pathos, she has not a woman's heart, Archibald. Oh, how strangely we seem to have been mixed up with these Erskines all our lives! It was a mistake to allow them as children to be so much together. It is nearly impossible to sever these early chords. Poor, poor Annie; heir to so sweet a heritage, and yet compelled to enter it only on sufferance as one far beneath it. It will take a lifetime to atone for the injustice done to her.'

'It was an unconscious wrong, Lily. Heaven knows that I would have given an account of my stewardship years ago,

gladly, and more easily than now. St. Veda's has never been ours, dear; we have enjoyed the possession of another, and eaten the bread which belonged by rights to Archie's child. It is not a pleasant thought. I suppose the woman sinned through ignorance of the wrong she was doing not only Annie, but us; at least it is charitable to think so.'

'Janet Erskine is not an ignorant woman, Archibald, but she is very selfish. I do not know how she could go about for twenty years with such a secret locked in her breast. I do not wonder that she had a morose, miserable look; and to think that she would have crowned the wrong by marrying Annie to her own son. Her ambition was very great!'

So injustice was done to Janet Erskine; she was blamed for a sin she had not committed. They believed she had known for twenty years the secret which had only come into her possession, to make her the most wretched of women, three weeks before.

'I wonder,' said Sir Archie thoughtfully, 'whether the skipper has known anything of this? Did I tell you young Adam brought this, that he found it at the Kelpie's Cove? *He* at least has no hand in it, and I cannot believe that the skipper is less innocent.'

'Oh no. He is a good man, old Adam Erskine—one of the best I have ever known. This will be a fearful grief to him. I could almost spare his wife for his sake, and yet she must be told that we know what she has done. Her sin must be pointed out to her. Do you not think so, Archibald?'

'Most assuredly. I shall go down, perhaps, this very night. We had better telegraph to Archie to come home to-night from Edinburgh. I wonder why the lad so persistently haunts Edinburgh! He seems to think he will find Annie there. Ethel will be amazed to hear this strange story.'

'She will be delighted. She has always loved Annie with a sister's love. Oh, if the child could only be restored to us! My heart yearns over her, dearest.'

'I pray she may be restored, that in the enjoyment of St. Veda's she may forget how cruel fortune has been to her,' said Sir Archie sadly. 'And yet it was only of late her life was not happy; since there was a talk of marrying her to Adam.'

'I don't know. She was left a great deal alone with Janet Erskine. Life with such a woman, who could do such a wrong, could never be happy. You will need to communicate all this to Mr. Bold, and to your Edinburgh lawyers.'

'Ay, it will be a fine tit-bit for Bold, a feather in his cap. He had the most supreme contempt for the pair who did us the honour to claim kinship with us. I shall be very curious to learn *their* little history, and how they come to have so intimate a knowledge of my brother's life in India. The story the self-styled Lady Grant told me, coincided in every particular with what we have read in this letter.'

'They may have lived at or near the same place, and so have heard poor Archie's story,' said Lady Grant. 'Well, shall we go and tell Ethel all this wonderful news?'

Meanwhile Adam Erskine, pondering over his curious find, was slowly walking back to Orr's Haven. The shadow had lifted from off the man since his talk with his father, and he was again Adam, the honest and kindly and true, although there was a kind of subdued quiet in his demeanour which betokened that his sorrow remained with him. He was, indeed, profoundly anxious about Annie. He did not share his father's hopeful certainty concerning her safety and well-being; his dreams were haunted by visions of Annie wandering alone and in sore straits in the cold and cruel town. He had only a vague idea of the perils which might surround a young girl there, but they were real enough to occasion him the deepest concern. A plan was maturing in his mind. The herring season was over, and work slack; he would take a week's noliday, he told himself, and devote it to searching for Annie. It did not occur to him to connect the finding of the

box with her; the full disclosure concerning her parentage was to come upon him soon with a strange shock.

He heard the clatter of teacups as he neared the open door, and was astonished that even their early tea hour was at hand. It was Friday afternoon, and the skipper was deep in the pages of his weekly paper, which he shared with two others in the place. Janet was preparing the tea, and she looked round, though without a smile, when her son entered. She had aged very much of late, he thought at that moment, and her face wore a harassed, careworn look, which indicated a mind ill at ease. Perhaps she too was fretting after Annie, though her pride would not let her admit it.

'Whaur hae ye been, lad?' said the skipper, looking up.

'At the Castle. What think ye I fand the day on the sands at the Kelpie's Cove?'

'We're no' guessers, Adam; tell't oot,' said the skipper, rather absently, returning to his perusal of his newspaper.

'Something that gar'd the Laird nearly jump ooten his skin,' said Adam, with quiet enjoyment.

Janet had her back to her son, and the knife to cut a slice off the loaf was in her hand. She held it on the crust, and seemed to be waiting for the rest. There was a curious grey pallor on her face.

'Ay lad, what was that?' asked the skipper, with some interest, and he held down the paper and looked inquiringly at his son.

'It was a box, an' there was that in't the Laird wad rather see than the finest diamonds,' said Adam. 'It's cam' frae India a' the road maybe, an' it contains his brither's marriage-lines, and their bairn's birth-lines, besides twa-three mair things that belanged to Mr. Archie that was. Queer, isn't, that it should come ashore here? I'm bound to say I dinna ken whaur or hoo it can hae come. It's about the queerest thing I've ever known. It's just as the Laird says, it looks as if it had drappit doon frae heaven.'

'Ay, man!' The skipper's voice was intense in its excited surprise as he listened to Adam's strange story. Janet never spoke; she stood quite still in the same position, with the blade of the knife resting on the crust of the loaf. They were so accustomed to her silence that they paid no attention to it.

'Ay, man!' repeated the skipper, in perfect wonderment. 'Div ye hear that, Janet? Wasn't that a queer find?'

'You were in a great hurry, running with it to the Laird,' she said, with difficulty, for every word was forced from her. She had received an awful shock, but her hand did not tremble as she cut up the bread. Perhaps she was getting inured to such shocks, and her nerves were gaining strength. But she dared not turn her face to them for a moment. She had felt it blanch herself, and knew it must look like the face of the dead.

'Hurry! I should think so. I had nae business wi't. It was his, an' fell gled was I to pit it in his hands. Eh, here's the Laird hissel.'

Janet Erskine gave a violent start. Had her sin then found her out? In any case she had a strange ordeal to face.

The Laird nodded to the skipper, who rose from his chair to receive him. His face was very white and set; all saw at once that there was something serious amiss.

'Adam,' said Sir Archie briefly, 'will you leave the house for a little? I have something to say privately to your father and mother.'

In sore amazement Adam obeyed. The skipper looked perplexed. Sir Archie's tones were not reassuring. As for Janet, she turned her face to Sir Archie, and, folding her arms, stood in silence. She was not a coward; she was ready to face the consequences of what she had done. As she expected, Sir Archie produced the box.

'Your son found this on the sands to-day, Mrs. Erskine,' he said, addressing his remarks directly to her.

'Ay, he was but telling us o't when ye cam' in, Sir Airchie,'

said the skipper, who could not understand the stern gravity on the Laird's face.

'Yes.' Sir Archie opened the lid, and laid the things out one by one on the table. 'I suppose I need not say these things are all familiar to you?' he added, again looking straight at Janet Erskine's iron face. 'I presume you recognise them? You have seen and handled each one before.'

A look of terror supplanted the surprise on the skipper's face. His wife never spoke.

'You have tampered with these things, which ought to have been delivered up years ago,' said Sir Archie sternly. 'Be good enough to tell me how long it is since you gave to the sea the secret it has rightly refused to keep.'

Janet Erskine stood silent, immovable, just as if she had not heard a word uttered.

'It was this which betrayed you,' said Sir Archie, hanging the necklet and locket on his forefinger. 'Lady Grant recognised it. If you cast your memory back, you may recall the morning of the wreck which cast up the child you took to yourself. Do you remember taking Lady Grant into the room, and showing her the locket on the dead woman's neck? That woman,' said Sir Archie, turning to the skipper, who was as still as death, 'was my brother's widow, Lady Grant of St. Veda's, and the child you have reared as your own is the heir to the heritage I have so long wrongfully enjoyed.'

The skipper groaned, and covered his face with his hands. Sir Archie's wrath rose at the serene composure exhibited by Janet Erskine, and he turned his flashing eyes on her face.

'Woman, will you not speak? What tempted you to keep such a secret? What were you to gain by it? You have done a fearful wrong to the living and the dead. What was your motive? Was it simply to gratify a selfish desire that you kept to yourself all knowledge of the child's identity? You have not only wronged her—almost irreparably, I fear, poor lost child!—but you have made me unconsciously a

usurper and a robber. The very bread I and mine have eaten for twenty years belonged by right to the girl you brought up as your own. You knew it, and yet you *dared* to be silent. Woman, what have you to say for yourself?'

She was at bay now, but she did not lose her self-control.

'You cannot make me speak,' she said slowly, as she turned away. 'It is only Annie who has the right to question me. I will not answer until she is here to bid me speak. I am a woman of my word.'





CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT BAY.



WHAT could they make of her?

Nothing. Adam Erskine turned away to the window, and laying his hands on the broad ledge, which in Annie's time had ever been gay with blooming flowers, looked across the turbulent sea. It was not more troubled than his own breast. That was a moment of supreme bitterness for him. Janet, the wife of his heart, whom he had loved and trusted beyond all women, the mother of his son, to be so utterly unworthy. Sir Archie understood his feelings and sympathized with him, but his anger burned sore against Janet Erskine. He had not a quick temper, but when he was roused, Sir Archie spared none. Like all long-suffering natures, he became relentless when the limit was reached. He looked straight once more at Janet Erskine, and though his voice was not loud, it had a hard, determined ring in it.

'Do you know that you are liable to severe punishment by law for this? Perhaps in the solitude of Greenlaw jail you will find your tongue.'

Her lip curled. She was a strange woman this, and possessed not only an indomitable will but an indomitable courage. There was little womanliness about her. Sir Archie's threat affected her not at all.

'Put me in the jail if you like,' she said, with a quiet insolence indescribably galling to Sir Archie's proud nature. 'I have told you who will make me speak. Ask Adam Erskine there if I ever go by my word.'

She passed by the Laird, and went along the narrow passage to the back door. She was mistress of the field, and Sir Archie turned rather helplessly to the skipper.

'Well, Adam, there is nothing to be got out of your wife, I see,' he said rather sharply. 'Have you no influence with her? It will be to her advantage to tell all she knows about this matter. It is not one of small importance, I assure you, as she may yet find to her cost.'

'Me hae influence with her, Sir Archie?' said the skipper in a low voice. 'She's a woman wha'll dae her ain way or nae, I tell ye, an' I hae lived wi' her five-an'-twenty years. Were I no' a man o' peace, we could never hae bidden thegither as lang.'

'I could imagine that,' said Sir Archie grimly. 'But I fancy you have made a mistake. A woman like her needs the bit put in her mouth before the race begins.'

'But, Sir Archie, that's no' Janet hersel' that spoke the day,' said the skipper, loyal to his wife too, even in the midst of his sore pain. 'The deil's gotten fairly intil her, an' she's letten slip the grace o' God. I kenna what to mak' o' her, Sir Archie. There hasna been peace in oor hoose for a twal-month past, what for I dinna ken. Maybe it's a discipline. We forget, ye ken, when we're aye sailin' on sunny seas. But, Sir Archie, ye'll never pit my Janet, the laddie's mither, in the jail. I couldna stand that.'

'No, no; I was only trying to make her speak,' said the Laird hastily. 'Well, I have come on a fool's errand; I had better go away back and set to finding Annie. *Where* can she be, Adam?'

'That's kent only to the Lord,' said the skipper; 'but I'm sure she's weel eneuch, for she promised to let me ken if

there was onything wrang, an' she never gangs by her word.'

Sir Archie shook his head. He did not by any means share the hope still held by the skipper. To him Annie's disappearance had assumed a very serious aspect.

'Well, I'll go. Will you try and reason with your obstinate wife, Adam? Take my advice and catch her up firm and fast. It's never too late to mend; and it'll do her good. Good afternoon.'

So saying, Sir Archie, dissatisfied and irritated, went his way.

Janet Erskine, leaning up against the post of the back-door, heard him go, and came back to the kitchen.

'Janet, my 'ooman, I want to ken the meanin' o' a' this,' said her husband sternly. 'This is a bonnie story I hae heard the day. Had ye ever that box in yer possession?'

'Yes, I had it; it's lain in the garret for one-and-twenty years,' returned Janet quietly, as she proceeded with her bread-cutting, precisely as if nothing had happened.

'Me ey, woman, was ye no' feared a judgment wad fa' on ye? The thing wasna yours. What richt had ye to keep onything belangin' ither folk? Oh, Janet, had ye but been honest, as ye should hae been, twenty years ago, what a trouble wad hae been saved us a'!'

'I wish I had died at onyrate before I took her into the house,' she said sullenly—'a plague and a curse she has been to us all the time.'

'Haud yer tongue. Tak' back thae lecin' words, Janet: an' syne haud yer tongue, if ye like, for ever,' said the skipper, his wrath leaping up in a sudden blaze. 'I canna thole ye, woman; ye're no' the Janet I married, but some ill limmer that nae man's fit tae pit up wi'. Ye'll hae to mend yer maimners, my 'ooman, or I'll maybe gar ye. Ye hae jist haen the upper hand ower lang.'

Janet's colour rose. They were not pleasant words for a wife to hear, in spite of their truth.

'An' if ye arena gaunna dae what's richt noo, Janet, you an' me canna bide thegither ony langer,' he continued, more quietly, but with decision. 'I'll bide wi' nae wummin that wilfully gangs against the Commandments. Will ye or will ye no' gang up to the Castle the nicht, an', after apologising to Sir Archie, lay bare a' ye ken about the box?'

'I won't,' she said. 'I won't humble myself to one of them except Annie. If I have sinned against any, it is against her. When she comes back, I'll tell her so, as I have said.'

'An' if she never comes back?'

'Then I'll hold my tongue. It won't matter then, for they can live at the Castle as they have ever done.'

'Did you throw that box in the sea, Janet?'

'Yes, I did; but I'll tell ye no more, Adam Erskine, for you wouldn't believe what I said. I've made up my mind what I'm to do, and I won't go by it.'

'Then I doot, my wummin, that there's an end to a' peace an' comfort atween you an' me. A wummin that keeps sic a secret frae me I canna treat as a wife. Ye haena dune fair by me, Janet, an' I hae ever been the best o' men to ye, my only faut bein' that ye hae aye gotten ower muckle o' yer ain way.'

Janet Erskine winced, and her mouth trembled. There was not a more wretched woman on the face of the earth than she; but the false, foolish pride and hardness of heart that was in her would not let her speak. If she had followed the impulse which was strong upon her at that moment, she would have knelt at her husband's feet and asked his forgiveness. The skipper's eye was filled with a melancholy and wistful earnestness as it dwelt on his wife's averted face. His heart yearned over her unspeakably; she was his wife, still dear to him in spite of her erring. His soul also was deeply concerned for her. His faith was simple; his belief in retribution for sin committed, firm and sure. He feared the wrath of God for Janet. His heart yearned over her more and more. Adam

came in then ; the subject was not mentioned, and he was too dutiful a son to ask what was voluntarily kept from him. They took tea together, and even talked a little on commonplace subjects. Any chance incomer could have detected nothing wrong. Are we all hypocrites, or is it a noble self-respect and self-control which prompts us to hide such things from our neighbours ? In spite of all our care, our skeletons will be laid bare, and, if we have none, our kind neighbours will speedily manufacture one for us, more hideous than any of our own creating. Oh, the world is cruel, it spares none, nothing is sacred ; it will tamper with our most precious joys and sorrows, and discuss our inner sanctuary with its lying lips, until life seems to lose its sweetness for us. It was already known in the Haven that there was a great deal amiss in the Erskine household, and yet did there live three more discreet people than its inmates ?

Sir Archie received by the evening post that day legal notice of the claim which had been presented by Mrs. Annie Orr-Grant to the estates of Orr's Haven and Mount Meldrum. It was, in point of fact, a notice for him to quit. He smiled as he read it, and, going up to the drawing-room, he read it aloud to his wife and daughter. Ethel was in a state of tremendous excitement over the whole affair, and, as was to be expected, the part concerning Annie was of the most intense interest to her. She could, indeed, talk of nothing else. It was wonderful to see her unselfishness. It did not seem to cost her a thought that the proof of Annie's identity was also proof that they had no right nor claim upon St. Veda's as a home. Perhaps she had confidence in Annie, and believed that none of them would fare badly at her gentle hands.

'What do you intend to do about this, then, Archibald ?' asked Lady Grant, not without anxiety, for she had still a strange dread of the pair who had come wrongfully seeking to wrest their rights from them.

'Do, my darling ? Nothing. It would be a huge joke to

let them carry the thing on. The Court begins its sittings this month; but it would be a pity to let the thing get into the newspapers,' said Sir Archie lightly.

'Oh, papa, you needn't mind for that; the newspapers have been before us,' said Ethel. 'Did I not tell you that Alice Dalrymple mentioned in her letter that there was a paragraph about us in last week's *World*?'

'Indeed, I suppose it would be too much to expect such a thing to pass unreported,' said Sir Archie, his brow clouding slightly. 'I am very sorry, for it exposes one to a great deal of questioning which one would rather avoid. Well, I suppose the best plan now will be to acquaint our august relatives in London with the existence of the box and its contents. It will be a nice, pleasant pill for them to swallow.'

'And what if they insist on carrying forward the proceedings they have instituted?' asked Lady Grant.

'Oh, they can't. No man in his right mind would act for them. But we must find Annie, as well as communicate with her relatives in Edinburgh. There must be some members of the Seton family left alive, surely.'

'Oh, papa, it is dreadful to think of Annie. *Where* can she be? If she only knew, how she would hasten to us!' cried Ethel, with tears in her eyes. 'Oh, surely our love and longing will draw her to us. I have often wondered that she could stay away so long from the Haven; she loved it so.'

Did no feeling of nearness to an unseen presence visit Ethel Grant as she uttered these words? It was very dark outside, though the sky was soft and clear, and studded by many stars. Up the long avenue, keeping close by the dark shadows of the overspreading trees, a slight figure stole, with its head down-bent a little, up, up, guided by the twinkling Castle lights, until it came very near. Then it stood still on the soft turf, where the yellow leaves lay scattered broadcast, and raising its head looked towards the long windows of the drawing-room. Two hands were tightly clasped; the breath came quick and

fast from between trembling lips ; the large, sweet eyes, fixed on these windows, were filled with passionate pain. So Annie Erskine looked once more on the house which sheltered the two she loved next best on earth to old Adam Erskine. *It* had still the first place in her heart. She stood very still until a shadow she recognised fell across the blind. *Ethel's* shadow, and her tears fell. She dared not stay, lest any should come upon her ; and, besides, the rumble of approaching wheels warned her, and turning about, she sped across the lawn to the little path leading to the staircase in the rock. She paused there, and watching the twinkling lights of the approaching vehicle, waited to see what it was, and who it contained. Before it came in sight, the tones of a voice fell upon her ears, borne to her on the still night air, the tones of a voice which was the sweetest music she had ever heard. It was Archie Grant returning from Edinburgh in obedience to the summons he had received, and he was only uttering a common-place remark to the groom who was driving him home. Oh, if he had but known how many steps would have been required to take him across the lawn to where his darling stood ! Poor Annie, consumed by an uncontrollable desire to look once more on these familiar scenes, and all unconscious of the momentous issues depending on her reappearance, turned away and ran down the wave-worn steps, murmuring, ' God bless him ! ' through her tears. She had had more than she expected or hoped for ; she had seen and heard him speak ; but, poor dear heart, it had not given the comfort she had looked for.

The tide was flowing when she reached the shore. She would need to be very fleet of foot to reach the Haven side before the narrow strip of sand was covered. But she knew every step ; the treacherous sea could not deceive her, who had studied its every capricious mood since her babyhood. So she reached the broader beach at the east side of the harbour in safety. There were a few lights twinkling here and there

about the hamlet, and a broad, steady radiance streamed from the kitchen window of the skipper's cottage. Glad of the darkness which had fallen early, she stole up the shingly slope with a fearfully beating heart. A low, green paling, over which clambered honeysuckle and wild rose and columbine, separated the little strip of garden from the road. The gate was shut. Annie stretched out her hand, and broke a branch off the honeysuckle, on which a few late blooms still lingered, filling the soft night air with their perfume, when the door suddenly opened, and old Adam Erskine, pipe in mouth, appeared on the threshold. The light streamed broadly out from the open door, and revealed the figure standing by the gate.

Adam Erskine saw the face of Annie as plainly as he had ever seen it in his life. He uttered a strange cry and sprang forward, but she turned and fled, and in a moment was lost to sight in the darkness as if she had never been there.

Adam Erskine stood shaking at the garden gate. He was not void of that strange belief in the supernatural which is peculiar to those who live so much upon the sea. He had not a doubt that he had seen a vision, and that it had been sent to acquaint him with Annie's fate. No thought of following her ever entered his head. And yet it was the real Annie after all, who had stolen an hour or two to revisit the scenes which were so dear to memory and heart. If he had only lingered another moment he would have heard the sound of the trap which had brought her from Grant's House Station, and was waiting to take her back. He tottered into the house, and sank into a chair. When his trembling lips could frame an answer to their questioning, he said solemnly,—

'I hae seen Annie's wraith the nicht. The Lord hath taen her to Himsel'. His will be dune.'



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

WELL, Phemie Seton, I wish we had some more to give the child. One pound seventeen and sixpence, after all she has done! It's shameful. I can't bear to offer it to her.'

Miss Janet was very much put out. It was term time, the tax-collectors had all left their compliments, and the little sisters had just finished their calculation of their means and expenditure for the past half-year. After everything was paid there was left exactly thirty-seven and sixpence to pay their little maid and keep themselves in pocket money till next quarter-day. It was the morning of one of the very dreariest of November days. A thick fog hung over beautiful Edinburgh, and, though it was nearly nine o'clock, the candles were still burning in the dining-room where the sisters usually breakfasted. There were gas brackets in the room, but the little ladies could not afford gas; besides, they considered that the two tall silver candlesticks gave a handsome look to their meagre table. A very, very tiny fire burned in the grate, and the little sisters were crouching over it, and hiding their thin, pale hands up the sleeves of the knitted spencers they wore in winter above their gowns. There was something indescribably pathetic in these two sitting so closely together in the feeble grey dawn,



their sweet old faces wearing such an earnest, troubled, anxious look. It was a matter of grave importance they had to discuss. They felt that they were not doing, and could not do, their duty by the young creature to whom in the dear kindness of their hearts they had given a home, and yet the idea of parting with her was one which neither had dared mention to the other. And yet it was quite uppermost in both their minds.

'Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet at length, in a solemn, weary voice, 'we'll have to let her go.'

Miss Phemie gave a gulp and a hasty glance round the room, which had never been so kept since the days when their energetic mother had ruled the house.

'I know what you are thinking, Phemie, but we can't do wrong,' said Miss Janet rather shakily. 'Shall we have Annie in, and talk it over with her?'

'I think, sister, you had better do it yourself,' said Phemie nervously. 'I—I'm afraid I couldn't stand it.'

'Oh, you must, Phemie Seton. Do you think it is a pleasant thing for me to do? You *are* a great baby.'

Miss Janet jumped up as she spoke, and, opening the dining-room door, called Annie by name. It was a curious thing that they never rang for her, as they would have done for any ordinary servant. She was more like a child of the house, though she never forgot her place, or presumed in the very slightest degree on the simple-hearted goodness of the ladies.

'Coming, Miss Janet,' the sweet, clear young voice answered back, and presently Annie appeared to see what they wished. It was not the Annie Erskine of old, though her face was sweet as it had ever been; the rounded beauty was gone from the cheek, the eye had lost its lustre, and the free young step its buoyancy. What had wrought the change? Was it the close and stifling atmosphere of the city, or was it the separation from the one she loved? She was not unhappy, in

spite of her changed looks ; she had found a haven of quiet rest with these two women, whose hearts a queen might have envied.

Miss Janet was suddenly struck by the change in the girl as she stood in the doorway, and her resolve gained in strength. They must do their duty by her at whatever cost to themselves.

'Come in, Annie, my dear—right in, and shut the door,' she said kindly. 'Sit down ; my sister and I wish to have a little talk with you.'

'Yes, Miss Janet,' said Annie, and sat down, feeling rather surprised.

'In the first place, my dear, I am sure you believe that we are very fond of you, and that we have never been so happy in our lives, at least for many years, as we have been since you came to stay with us.'

'It is very kind to say so,' Annie said, in a low voice, but her eyes filled.

'But though we are very fond of you, and have the desire in our hearts to be selfish about it,' continued Miss Janet, nodding her head, 'we are determined to do our duty, and we think it our duty, Annie Erskine, to send you away from us.'

'Oh, why ?' These words fell falteringly from the girl's lips, and her eyes met Miss Janet's with a startled look in their depths. 'Have I'—

'No, no, Annie Erskine, my girl, everything you have ever done in this house has been proper and good, and you have been a perfect godsend to us,' said Miss Janet ; then, after a moment's hesitation, for, of course, it was a highly improper thing to do before a little servant maid, she opened the shabby old calf-skin purse which lay beside her plate, and from it counted out thirty-seven shillings.

'Do you see that money, Annie Erskine, seven-and-thirty shillings ? that's every half-penny we have in this world till the next quarter-day,' she said, and a little bit of bright colour

began to burn in her faded cheek. 'We told you we were very poor, and as we have so little, so very little, to give you, my dear girl, my sister and I have made up our minds that you must leave us.'

While Miss Janet was uttering these words, the colour began to rise too in Annie Erskine's cheek.

'We are very much ashamed, not because we are poor, because that is not our fault,' continued Miss Janet, nodding her head again; 'but because we cannot give you anything in return for what you have done for us. We'—

'What have I done in comparison with what you have done for me?' cried Annie, in a great burst of sorrow. 'You took me in, you gave me a home when I had none, you trusted me when no other would. Don't send me away! I won't go. I'll rise early in the mornings and do all the work, and go out and earn something for you through the day, if you will let me, only don't send me away.'

'Phemie Seton, do you hear that?' asked Miss Janet, and there was a distinct note of triumph in her shrill, sweet voice.

'I would die to serve you, you have been so good to me, and I love you so,' cried Annie, her sweet face all aglow with her earnestness. 'I will work day and night, more than ever I have done, just to show you how I love you.'

'You are a good child, Annie Erskine, and you shall not be our servant any more, though indeed Phemie and I have never regarded you as that,' said Miss Janet. 'You shall be our young sister; you bear the name of our own young sister, whose sad, beautiful story we will tell you some day; and we'll lay our heads together, and plan and plan till we find a road out of this difficulty, as we have always done.'

Miss Janet approached the young girl, laid her two hands on her shoulders, and kissed her on the cheek. Then Miss Phemie, whose foolish, romantic, old heart was moved by this little scene, rose too, and kissed her, and so the new compact was sealed.

'I have nearly four pounds left, Miss Janet,' said Annie cheerfully, when they had all recovered their composure. 'Let me bring it to you. It is my very own. Those who loved me gave it to me; they would be glad, oh, so glad to know how it has been spent.'

'Annie, my child.' Miss Janet's affectionate eyes turned with deep gravity on the girl's face. 'If you are to be our young sister, we think you should tell us a little about these dear people you have left. We have often talked about it, not out of any idle curiosity, but only out of our growing love for you. We cannot understand how one so young and sweet as you should have had such a strange experience. We know it is a sad subject for you, and we will not hurry you. Perhaps some day soon, when we are having our little chat, you will tell us something.'

'I will tell you all now, if you will let me. I have often wished to do so. I have had one secret from you only since I came—done one thing of which you did not know,' said Annie. 'Do you remember that day, it was the 27th of October, when you went out to the country to dine and sleep?'

'Perfectly,' said Miss Janet; 'at our cousins at Gillars Manse, Phemie Seton, where we met Sir Malcolm Montgomery and his sweet lady. Well, Annie?'

'I went away by train that afternoon back to my old home to see it,' said Annie brokenly. 'I had no intention when you left in the morning. It grew upon me during the day as I thought about them all. I was home again before nine o'clock. Will you forgive me for not telling you about it before?'

'Surely; but, Annie, if you had but asked any day we would cheerfully have let you away. You have so well earned your little holiday. Is the place very far away? Where is it?'

Just at that moment, and before Annie could reply, the postman gave the bell his customary tremendous peal. The

little ladies instantly flew into a flutter of excitement: they received so few letters, that the arrival of one would not be forgotten for days.

It was certainly a formidable-looking packet which Annie brought in on the quaint silver salver, and handed to Miss Janet. Though the younger, Miss Janet was the mistress in all things.

‘Bless me, Phemie Seton, what can this be?’ she exclaimed, receiving the packet rather hesitatingly into her hands.

‘It can’t be a tax-paper. I’m positive they’re all paid—water-rate, poor-rate, police-rate, inhabited house’—

‘Besides, the man calls with these, Janet; they do not come by post,’ interrupted Miss Phemie.

Annie slipped away out of the room, and Miss Janet, carefully cutting open the end of the blue envelope with her ivory paper-knife, pulled out the documents within in a very gingerly manner.

‘Look at the post-marks, sister,’ suggested Miss Seton, as her sister put on her spectacles, with fingers trembling with excitement.

‘London!’ exclaimed Miss Janet. ‘What can it mean?’

She unfolded a white paper first, which proved to be a lawyer’s letter.

‘I’ll read it out, Phemie Seton, if I’m able. Bless me! what can any lawyer have to write to us about? It is extraordinary and rather alarming. We don’t owe anybody anything, do we?’

‘You know best,’ said Miss Phemie quickly, for her curiosity was very great.

‘Well, well, here it is,—

“42 RED LION STREET,

“LONDON, *November 14, 18—.*

“DEAR MESDAMES,—We have the honour to inform you that through the death of our esteemed client, Mr. Andrew

Maitland, of 21 Abingdon Road, Kensington, lately of Berbice, British Guiana, you have become joint legatees of his entire estate, which includes the house and entire furnishings and plenishings at 21 Abingdon Road. We cannot as yet name the exact amount of money left, as it is not realized, but should say it must amount to between five and six thousand pounds. We may add that it was only within a few days of his death that our client learned of the existence of two daughters of his only sister, and that he was making preparations for paying a visit to Scotland when his fatal illness seized him. He died from the effects of an apoplectic fit.

“We think it would be advisable for you, if at all possible, to come up to London. If not, a representative of our firm will be glad to wait upon you at your convenience. The house is in possession of two servants, whom Mr. Maitland had only engaged by the month. Their time expires in three or four days, and it might be well if you could come up and see how matters stand.

“Mr. Maitland is to be buried to-morrow. He has no friends in London, having only returned from Berbice a few months ago, and having since been busy winding up his affairs. We are aware that Mr. Maitland looked forward to spending a period of well-earned leisure in his old age, and was cheered very recently by the hope that you would share it with him. Awaiting your instructions, we are, yours faithfully,

GRATHAM & SYKES.

“The Misses Seton.”

A dead silence followed the reading of this letter.

‘Do you think, Phemie Seton,’ asked Miss Janet in a whisper, ‘that anybody would dare to play a trick on us? Do you think there could be a particle of truth in this?’

‘It’s all true,’ said Miss Phemie. ‘Andrew Maitland, our mother’s own brother. Don’t you remember the story, Janet, how he ran away from Gillars Manse and went to sea when

he was fourteen, and nobody ever heard of him again? Oh, what a strange world it is!’ and Miss Phemie began to weep, overcome by excitement and the recalling of the far-gone past.

‘What are you crying for, Phemie Seton? I can’t cry over Andrew Maitland, for I never saw him, and I’m not sure if I ever heard of him,’ said Miss Janet bluntly. ‘Mother’s own brother come back an old man! Ay, ay, it’s very strange.’

Miss Janet took up the letter again, and read it slowly through to herself from beginning to end. Then she noticed another paper in the blue envelope, which, when unfolded, proved to be a copy of Andrew Maitland’s will. Its formal legal phrasing and reiterated statements were not so easily understood as the lawyer’s concise epistle, but all at once the full truth dawned on Miss Janet’s mind. She laid down the papers, took off her spectacles, and looked very solemnly at her sister.

‘Phemie Seton, do you know what has happened to us?’ she said, with a thrill in her old voice. ‘We’re rich women, we’ve come into a fortune; six thousand pounds, and a furnished house in the west end of London. I doubt it’ll be the death of us; we’re poor silly old fools. What’ll we do with so much money?’

‘Spend it,’ quoth Miss Phemie, jumping up. ‘Buy clothes and bonnets and new gloves and jewellery. We’ll live like other rich women, and we’ll dress Annie Erskine as she should be dressed, and she’ll turn a score of heads.’

Miss Janet laughed such a laugh as had not been heard in that old house for five-and-twenty years.

‘Annie! Annie Erskine! come here,’ she cried, through the half open door. ‘Come here, and hear what has happened to us.’

Annie came running into the room, with her glass cloth over her arms.

‘We’ve come into a fortune, Annie—six thousand pounds and a house!’ cried Miss Janet. ‘This is a lawyer’s letter,

see, and a copy of our uncle Andrew Maitland's will ; and we never knew we had an uncle ! Oh, I wonder if he knew how very badly off we are, and what a boon this money would be to us all !'

'Oh, is it true, Miss Janet ?' asked Annie breathlessly, but growing radiant with delight.

'True as gospel,' said Miss Janet solemnly. 'Pray for us, child, that we may have grace to stand prosperity, and that our old heads may not be turned. God *has* always been far better to us than we deserved.'



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CHAPTER XXX.

OUR RICH RELATIONS!

THERE had never been such tremendous excitement in the home of the little sisters, since that far-off time when the love affair of two young people had made for them the beginning of sorrows. But this was a pleasant excitement, a delightful excitement, which raised even the drooping spirits of Annie Erskine, and lifted her out of herself. That stolen visit to Orr's Haven had not done her good; nay, it had fostered in her a spirit of discontent and almost intolerable longing. She had found everything there apparently the same; it seemed to her that they had not missed or mourned her at all, and the thought was fraught with a deep and peculiar bitterness. This great event, then, lifted her entirely out of herself and her own trials. It was impossible not to rejoice in the happiness of these two dear women, who were like children over the enjoyment of a new toy. The news had rendered them totally helpless. They could do nothing but sit and plan and plan and spend their money in imagination—a pleasure which afforded them no little satisfaction. All women like to spend money, and these two had never known the luxury of possessing a spare penny. So we need not grudge them their keen anticipation of the delights in store. It was decided at length that they should lock

up the house in Northumberland Street, and travel by the night mail to London. Annie, of course, must accompany them.

'But how are we to go, sister?' asked Miss Phemie, pointing dolefully to the old calfskin purse with its meagre contents. 'We have not the wherewithal even to pay our tickets.'

'Oh, I'll see about that, Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet, with an air of great consequence most delightful to behold. 'I'll go round to Christopher Seton's office in Castle Street, and ask the loan of ten pounds. I suppose he will not refuse it to people who have come into a fortune.'

'It would be better that they should not know anything about it, sister, I think,' said Miss Phemie, rather doubtfully. 'I believe they will begin to make a fuss with us directly. I am afraid our relatives are not quite disinterested.'

'Let them try it, just let them try it,' said Miss Janet, with a toss of her head. 'I shall let Christopher Seton understand that the loan is purely a business transaction. *He* shall not have a finger in our pie, and we'll keep that bird of paradise, his wife, at arm's length now. It'll be our turn.'

Within an hour Miss Janet, dressed in her best, proceeded round to her relative's office in Castle Street. The clerks in the outer office tittered at the sight of the quaint, old-fashioned little woman; but she only eyed them with much severity and a mild expression of compassion most beautiful to behold, and requested, in a very dignified manner, to be shown into Mr. Seton's private room. Mr. Seton, a sleek, bald-headed, pompous-looking old gentleman, received his relative with an expression of considerable surprise. He thought he surmised her business, and was not very affable to her. Although his poor relations had never once asked pecuniary or any other kind of aid from him, he immediately decided that she had come to do so now. And under his bland, imperturbable smile, he hid a determination which no entreaties would melt.

Mr. Christopher Seton believed in setting his foot down on poor relations; why they existed at all was a problem he could not solve.

Miss Janet did not give him time to speak. She was a shrewd little woman in some respects, and she divined in a moment her relative's unspoken thought, and smiled quietly to herself.

'Will you look at these documents, Christopher Seton?' she said, handing him the blue envelope; 'and then tell me if you'll lend me ten pounds for two days on the strength of them.'

Mr. Christopher Seton took the blue envelope with alacrity, and speedily mastered its contents.

'Allow me to congratulate you and your sister, Janet,' he said, beaming all over. 'Six thousand pounds and a house worth, perhaps, other three! I know Abingdon Road well. It is a very good neighbourhood. Why, you are quite rich women.'

'We are grateful for the mercy of God to us, cousin,' said Miss Janet quietly. 'You see it is necessary that we should go up to London at once. We have no money. Will you give me that ten pounds just now, Christopher? I am sure Andrew Maitland's lawyer will give us a cheque to refund it at once.'

'I am glad you have come to me. Of course you wish me to act for you through this business?'

'Act for us! How?'

'As your solicitor or man of business, as we put it here.'

'Oh no, thank you. Those gentlemen who have written so kindly to us, and who had Andrew Maitland's confidence, will do very well for us,' said Miss Janet briskly. 'Will you excuse me hurrying you, cousin, but we have a great deal to do to-day.'

'And are you going to London to-night?'

'Yes.'

‘Can I do nothing for you, then? I will willingly accompany you if you like, Janet,’ said the lawyer blandly. ‘You and your sister have very little experience of travelling or of business. I fear you may be taken advantage of.’

‘Maybe, maybe. We must just make up our minds for that; though, for that matter, Phemie and I have never found outside folk so hardly disposed to us as our own kin,’ said Miss Janet, with a delightful candour which caused Mr. Christopher to redden slightly. ‘Can you conveniently lend me that money then, cousin; or shall I seek it from some one else?’

Mr. Christopher Seton unlocked his safe. He hoped even yet to get his finger in this pie, and must deal diplomatically with the poor relatives who had become rich relatives in such a curious way. So Miss Janet marched triumphantly out of the office with the ten pounds in her pocket, and Mr. Christopher Seton walked away round half an hour before lunch time to Heriot Row to inform his wife of the windfall which had come to the little sisters in Northumberland Street.

That night the shutters were shut, the doors locked in the old house, and the three, as happy as children out for a holiday, drove away in a cab to the station to catch the London train. But for Annie Erskine these two ladies would have been in a sorry plight. She packed all the luggage, and even saw that a telegram was despatched to the lawyer to meet them at the station in the morning; for she pictured to herself the helplessness of the sisters arriving in a great city, and not knowing where to turn. And they thanked and blessed her by turns and together, and they were all very much excited, but very, very happy indeed.

In the course of the next forenoon an early caller knocked at the door of the house in Northumberland Street. It was Sir Archibald Grant, and he had in his pocket-book a letter which would have caused the little sisters a great deal more

excitement than that which had come from the solicitors in Red Lion Street. It was a message from the dead, the letter penned at sea by their own dear lost sister when that fatal voyage was nearing its close. Sir Archie received no answer to his repeated summons at the door, then he rang the bell of the next house on the landing. An elderly, pleasant-faced woman answered the ring.

'I am sorry to trouble you, madam,' he said, with that fine courtesy which he showed to both high and low. 'I can gain no admittance to this house. Is it still the residence of a lady of the name of Seton?'

'Yes, sir, two ladies. The Miss Setons, elderly maiden ladies,' responded the woman, with a slight smile.

'The mother, the widow, is dead then?' said Sir Archie interrogatively.

'Oh yes. The two poor ladies have been orphans long enough, sir.'

'Ah, are they from home, do you know?'

'They were at home yesterday, but my maid told me she saw them get into a cab late last night with the person who lives with them, and a great quantity of luggage. We couldn't think enough of it, sir, for we have lived beside them for sixteen years, and to my certain knowledge their house has never been shut before.'

Sir Archie looked greatly perplexed. But he had learned so much. The sisters of his brother's poor young wife were still alive.

'If you wish to know any more about them, sir,' said the woman kindly, 'if you go to Mr. Christopher Seton, the W.S. in Castle Street, he will be able to tell you. He is a connection of theirs.'

'Ah, thank you; I shall just do that. You have been very kind,' said Sir Archie, gravely lifting his hat. 'Good morning, madam,' and straight to Castle Street Sir Archie went, and sent in his card to Mr. Christopher Seton. Needless to say

that gentleman was all bows and smiles for his noble visitor. He was consumed with curiosity as to his errand, the name being perfectly familiar to him. When it suited him, Mr. Christopher could speak of my poor dear cousin, the late Lady Grant of St. Veda's. But he did not find Sir Archie at all communicative.

'Good morning,' he said gravely. 'I have called to see if you know the address of the Misses Seton of Northumberland Street. I have been to their house and found it shut.'

'Yes, Sir Archibald. My kinswomen have had an extraordinary stroke of good fortune. They have come into a nice little sum of money through the death of a brother of their mother's whom nobody knew anything about. They only heard of it yesterday. He died in London, and they had to go up immediately. They went by the mail last night. I saw them off.'

'Indeed, that is unfortunate,' said Sir Archie, with rather a perplexed look on his face.

'But I can give you the address of their lawyer, who could tell you at once where they are to be found,' said Mr. Seton eagerly.

'Thanks, if you will be so good.'

'Might I inquire, as a friend of the family, Sir Archibald,' said Mr. Seton in his wily fashion, as he wrote the address, 'whether your inquiry for them has any relation to certain events which occurred many years ago, and in which both your own and our family were concerned?'

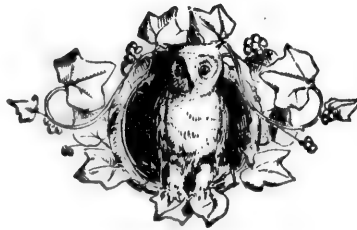
'It is connected with that,' Sir Archie acceded rather stiffly, for he resented the questioning to which he was being subjected. The lawyer saw it, and changed the subject.

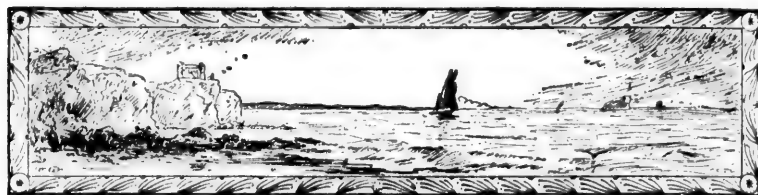
'Can it be possible that a rumour I heard no later than this morning, that you are shortly to be involved in a lawsuit has any truth in it, Sir Archibald?'

'A lawsuit was impending in connection with the appearance of a claimant to St. Veda's and Mount Meldrum, but it

will not now go on,' said Sir Archie enigmatically, as he took the card from the lawyer's hands. 'A thousand thanks for your courtesy, Mr. Seton. Good morning.'

'Good morning, Sir Archibald,' said the lawyer, as he bowed his visitor out. He had a very hard nut to crack over his desk that November morning.






CHAPTER XXXI.

ANOTHER SHOCK.

WHO would have known the little sisters? They looked like different beings as they sat by the fireside in the substantial and comfortable dining-room of the house in Abingdon Road.

For the first time for a score of years they wore gowns of new material and modern make; and they became them well. Plain, simple gowns of good black material, not at all trimmed with crape, for the little ladies were delicately conscientious, and they would not make a great show of mourning for the man they had never seen, but whose generous kindness had wrought such a change in their lives. It was a curious thing, and one which showed of what material the little sisters were constituted, that the cramped and narrow way of existence in which they had been so long compelled to walk had left very little impress on their characters, none at all upon their hearts. Time would be denied me to tell you of the many benevolent schemes which were discussed between them. Their money was to be spent not on themselves alone, but for the good of every needy and oppressed creature of whose want they knew. The two servants who had been engaged by Andrew Maitland were still in the house. As for Annie Erskine, her lines had now fallen in pleasant places indeed. She was no longer a servant,



but a young and loved sister, on whom the little ladies delighted to lavish their kindness. Could it be that that strange mysterious tie of kinship, which time and circumstance is powerless to dissolve, spoke in their hearts, though they did not know it? In all the hurry and excitement this change had brought, the secret of their young charge's former life had never been communicated to the sisters, but they were talking of it that afternoon as they sat together by their cosy hearth.

'We must get Annie to tell us of it this very night, sister,' said Miss Phemie, as she leaned back in her chair, with her slim white hands crossed in her lap, and her dainty little feet on the velvet stool before the comfortable blaze. How these two enjoyed the luxury of a real fire blazing and crackling up the chimney! The days had so long been, dear hearts, when they had to weigh each piece of coal before it was put in the grate. They had known poverty in its grimmest mood; surely it was meet that they should enjoy some ease and comfort now.

'She is a sweet child, Phemie, but there is something about her strangely puzzling to me. She has undoubtedly been led to us, and why should we have been moved to treat her differently from any other young girl, if not to prepare us for something we are to hear? I should not be astonished to learn that she belongs to one of our best families.'

'But, sister, she has been taught to work. Did you ever see one of her years who could set a room to rights or cook a dinner like her?' asked Miss Phemie. 'The daughters of our best families cannot do these things.'

'You are quite right. There is a mystery about her,' said Miss Janet musingly, and for a time both were silent. It was a curious thing how, in this unaccustomed ease and perfect freedom from care and harassing planning to make ends meet, Janet Seton's thoughts and heart should be much with the past. It was as if she had become the dreamer now, and

was glad to leave the present to those who were interested in it. Oh, it was so sweet for her just to rest, her mind had been so long on the rack.

Seeing that her sister had fallen into one of the dreamy moods which had visited her of late, Miss Phemie took up a paper which lay on the little table at her side and began to read it, and just then the comely and well-trained housemaid came in to set the table for their early tea.

'Will Miss Annie be in to tea, please?' she asked, but Miss Phemie gave her no answer. The maid, waiting courteously for her answer, saw the little lady trembling violently, evidently agitated by something she was reading.

'Just leave the room a moment, Margaret,' she said at length. 'Janet, Janet Seton, listen to this,' and in a voice shaking with excitement Miss Phemie read the following paragraph:—

'Romance of a Scotch Succession Case.—Some time ago we informed our readers on good authority that a claimant, who seemed to be possessed of authentic proof, had appeared and laid claim to the extensive estates of St. Veda's and Mount Meldrum in Berwickshire, the family seats of the Orr-Grants. At that time we gave some particulars regarding the romantic marriage of the elder brother, whose widow had returned from India. Since then the story has received a further and extraordinary development, which surpasses in interest the plot of many a novel. It seems that the sea has given up one of its secrets, and that Sir Archibald Grant has received into his hands as treasure trove, a box containing the certificate of his brother's marriage, and of the birth of the child, a girl, the heiress, of course, to the estates! Twenty-two years ago a sailing vessel was wrecked near St. Abb's, and a lady and child were washed ashore. The lady died, the child was brought up in a fisherman's cottage, and in the meantime, we suppose, the sea kept the box with the secret. This child proves to be the real heiress to the estates.

'We await with keen interest the further development of

this strange but true tale, which adds another to the many romances which are the heritage of our older families. Needless to say, the other claimant, with her son, has found it convenient to disappear, probably to re-enter the obscurity from whence they sprung.'

'Mercy me, Phemie Seton!' cried Miss Janet, as pale as death.

The two sisters looked at each other in dumb surprise for a moment, then Miss Janet grasped the paper, and slowly read every word aloud once more. They had no preparation for this shock of surprise, and were nearly overcome by it. Poor little ladies, if Time in his flight had long forgotten to mark his footprints by any event in their quiet lives, he had suddenly taken thought for them, and seemed as if seeking to atone for past heedlessness by heaping upon them the choicest bits from his store. Here was news of their sister at last, the news they had long prayed, but ceased to hope, for. Little wonder they had not a word to say.

While they were sitting, not uttering one word, there came a tremendous peal at the bell.

'That'll be Annie, sister. I am glad she has come in. I was growing anxious about her. We have grown very fond of that child, Janet.'

In a few moments Margaret appeared at the dining-room door looking pale and scared.

'Oh, Miss Seton,' she said hurriedly, 'that is a message from one of the hospitals for you to come.'

'What for?'

Both the sisters sprang to their feet apprehending evil.

'Something has happened to Miss Annie,' said the woman hesitatingly, 'and they have taken her to the hospital, and sent for you. They have a cab at the door. Could I help you to get ready?'

'Oh, Janet Seton, there are too many things happening to us. We shall not be able to stand them, and keep our sound

judgment,' said Miss Phemie, in a kind of wail, as she tottered upstairs.

Janet Seton spoke never a word. In an emergency such as this, she was a woman who could act with presence of mind and common-sense. But the shock was not less terrible for her. Perhaps of the two, her love for Annie was the greater. There was something in the sweet, modest, helpful, willing girl which had completely won her heart. Within the hour the two slender little figures in black were standing in the ante room at one of the great hospitals, awaiting permission to see their child. That waiting was torture to them both, and seemed intolerably long. At length, however, a nurse in a trailing blue gown and spotless cap and apron came to them. Her face was pleasant and her manner sympathetic, though her words were few and brief.

'You are the friends of the young girl from Abingdon Road who has been taken into the accident ward?' she asked.

'Yes. What has happened to her, madam? Be pleased to tell us, quickly, for it is agony we bear in this suspense.'

'Yes, I know. Sit down, please. You will not be allowed up just yet; the doctors are busy.'

'She is not dead, then?' said Miss Janet, with a gasp of relief.

'Oh no! She may not even be very seriously injured, though she was brought to us unconscious,' said the nurse cheerfully. 'She was run over in the street by a gentleman's drag. You will be pleased to learn that it was to save a little ragged child she risked her life.'

'Our dear Annie, our brave lassie!' cried the little sisters in a breath, with tears in their eyes.

'She has not been able to speak of course; fortunately she had an address in her pocket, or you might have had to endure worse suspense than those few minutes have involved,' said the nurse, with a slight smile.

'Thank you for that, Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet quickly. 'The address was my sister's thought. She would not let our dear girl go out without it. You see we are simple folk, unaccustomed to London ways.'

'It was a very good thought,' said the nurse with quiet approval.

'She will be able to go home with us to-night?' said Miss Phemie anxiously; but the nurse shook her head.

'It is very unlikely. I shall go up now, and see if they have learned the extent of the injuries. If you will wait a little you may see her; at any rate you will learn exactly what state she is in,' said the nurse kindly as she withdrew.

She was not very long absent, and returned with rather a grave expression on her face.

'There are no bones broken, the surgeon thinks,' she said at once. 'But there has been a fearful shock to the system. She has not quite recovered consciousness. I think it needless for you to wait, for I am afraid you will not be allowed to see her to-night.'

The little sisters looked helplessly at each other, and imploringly at the nurse.

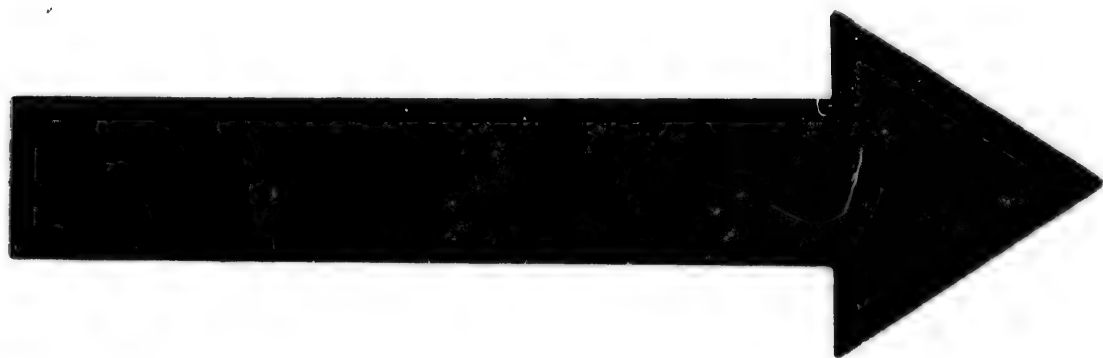
'And must we go away, and leave her here all night?'

'She may have to remain some days, or even weeks,' returned the nurse. 'But she will have the best skill and attention, and you can rest assured that the very moment the surgeons consider it safe she shall be sent home. We can only afford to keep serious cases in the beds, we have so many applications.'

Miss Janet winced. In spite of the kind manner of the nurse, it seemed a terrible thing to leave their little maid alone among strangers in that great place, surrounded on every hand by suffering and pain.

'Is she among a great many?' she asked.

'No, she is in one of the small wards. Perhaps one of you



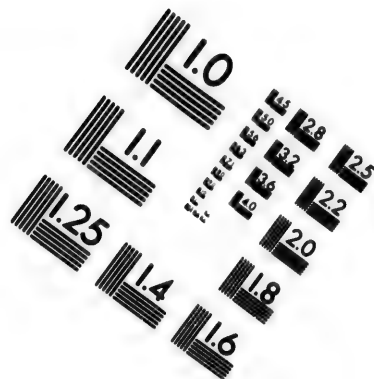
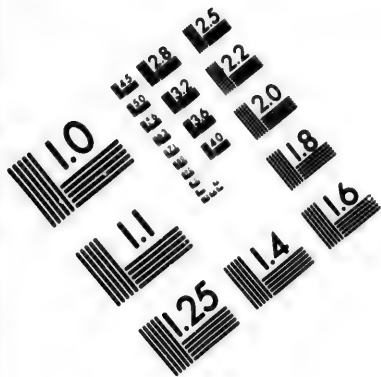
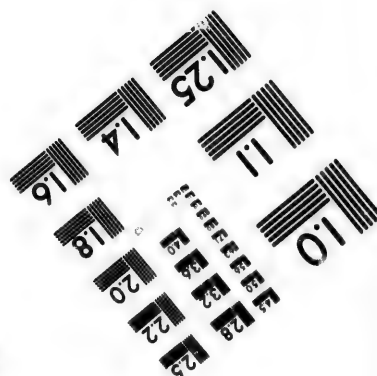
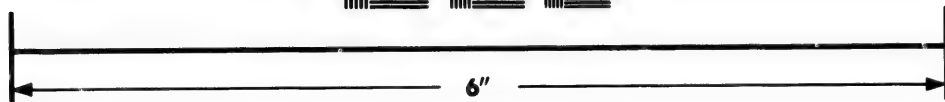
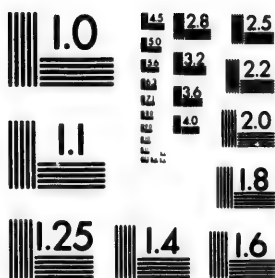


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might come up with me and have a peep at her, to satisfy yourselves about her identity,' suggested the nurse, a proposal at which the little sisters readily caught. Miss Janet signified her readiness to accompany the nurse at once, and she was led through the long, wide corridors, upstairs, and across another great hall, and at last found herself in the little square ward where there were four patients. With wonderfully steady step Miss Janet went forward to the bed where the surgeons stood. And it was Annie, sure enough, her sweet face lying deathly white on the pillow, though there were no traces of suffering upon it.

Just as Miss Janet approached there was a faint stirring of the long lashes on the cheek, and a perceptible trembling of the lips, which gave signs of returning consciousness; and presently, perhaps the look of love and pain on Miss Janet's kind face helped to awaken her, she opened her eyes and looked round a little wonderingly.

'Where am I?' She stretched out her right hand, which had a great bruise upon it, to Miss Janet, recognising one familiar face. 'Oh yes, I remember; the little boy and the horse's feet; was he killed?'

'No; saved: thanks to you, my dear,' said the elder surgeon, smiling down into her face.

'His mother will be glad. I am not at home, Miss Janet? What place is this?'

'It is the hospital, my precious child, but they will let you home soon, and we will nurse you well again,' cried Miss Janet, doing her best to speak calmly, but breaking down in the attempt. Annie opened her eyes wider and looked straight at the surgeon's grave face.

'Am I very sore hurt?' she asked. 'Shall I die?'

'Die! oh, nonsense. We don't let many die here,' said the surgeon quickly. 'You are to shut your eyes and let your poor, little, shaken nerves get a rest. Do you feel badly hurt?'

'My back hurts, and my head swims. Where is Miss Seton, Miss Janet?'

'Downstairs, dying to see you, Annie, but they won't let her.'

'Time enough to-morrow, time enough to-morrow,' growled the surgeon. '*You* are greatly privileged, madam,' he added to Miss Janet. 'Don't let us regret that privilege by staying too long.'

It was terrible for Miss Janet to go, but she saw that it was imperative. She bent over the bed and kissed the girl's pale brow. Annie tried to place her bruised right arm round the neck of her kind friend, but the pain kept her back.

'Thank you, thank you, come again to-morrow, stoop low,' she whispered. 'Write to father to-night. I promised if anything was wrong to send for him. Captain Erskine, Orr's Haven, Ayton.'

Miss Janet nodded, another surprise for her in that familiar address. But she dared not say a word. With haste, which was really kindness to the injured girl, the nurse hurried the warm-hearted woman out of the ward.

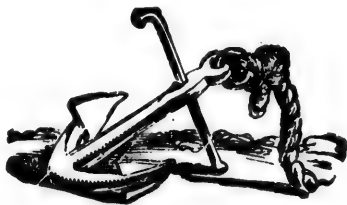
Miss Janet never uttered a single word during the drive back to Abingdon Road. She sat bolt upright on the seat, looking straight before her, as if her entire interest were centred in the shabby blue cloth and the worn buttons which adorned the front of the cab. If she heard sundry remarks made by her sister she heeded them not at all. Miss Janet was in truth trying to solve a problem, to make fact out of a long chain of probabilities, and gradually the light, strong, clear, and unmistakable, began to dawn upon her.

The greatest surprise of all had been in reserve, but they were coming very near it now.

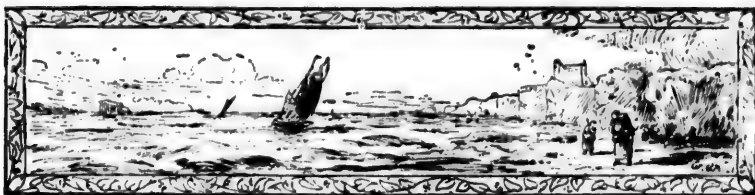
'A gentleman called while you were out, ma'am,' said Margaret, after making anxious inquiry as to the result of their visit to the hospital. 'He seemed very much disappointed at not seeing you, and is to call again this evening.'

'Yes. Who was it, Margaret?' Miss Janet asked with but a languid interest. Margaret handed the card from the salver on the hall table, and Miss Janet, standing directly under the gas lamp, read the name,—

'Sir Archibald Grant.'



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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST.



HEMIE SETON,' said Miss Janet, in a hurried, excited way, 'let us get off our bonnets as fast as we can. There is a great deal to talk about. If we sit up till morning I doubt we'll never red dress up this ravel.'

'Tea is ready, Miss Seton; shall I take it in?' asked the maid.

'Oh yes, Margaret, take it in. It will do me good. A great many extraordinary things are happening to us, my girl, and we would need something to keep us calm,' said Miss Janet, as she ran nimbly upstairs.

But though the table was temptingly spread, and the silver urn hissing on the tray, when the little sisters came down to the dining-room, Miss Janet did not take her accustomed place, but stood on the hearthrug with her hands folded behind her back.

'Phemie Seton,' she said grimly, 'you have read the name on that card at least a dozen times. Does nothing strike you?'

'I don't know what to think,' answered Miss Phemie rather helplessly. 'Sir Archibald Grant; of course that can't be our brother-in-law, for this paper says he is dead.'

'No; it is the younger brother. So nothing strikes you,

Phemie Seton, say in connection with our poor, dear girl whom we have just left ?'

Miss Phemie opened her eyes very wide. She was not shrewd, nor clever, like her sister. She had, indeed, been quite bewildered by the somewhat complicated story she had read in *Truth*.

'You know I have never guessed anything. Tell me what *you* think, Janet,' she said meekly.

'That Annie Erskine is Annie Grant, Phemie Seton ; our own sister's child, whom the Lord in His mercy sent to us in our own and her need,' said Miss Janet, with heaving bosom. 'Sir Archibald is seeking her ; has learned she is with us. The only thing I do not understand is, why she should ever have left home. Oh, Phemie Seton, our dear Annie's bairn ! To think she should have served us like a common waiting woman when she was our own kith and kin.'

Here Miss Janet broke down, and began to cry quietly to herself. And what could Miss Phemie do but join her, and so for a time there was nothing said.

'To think,' continued Miss Janet, more calmly, 'that the heiress of St. Veda's should have served us, should even—oh, Phemie Seton, the shame of it!—have washed down that common stair in Northumberland Street, and cleaned the door bell in the mornings. Did you ever know of such a thing ?'

'I never did, but we couldn't help it, sister,' said Miss Phemie faintly. 'Besides, if she had not been doing that for us, who knows where she might have been. It was a good turn we did her, and we couldn't help not knowing who she was.'

'No, I daresay you are right, Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet, with a sigh. 'My heart is very heavy about the bairn. It is a question even if she ever comes into her inheritance. Oh, *why would* she wander about these streets, and insist on pulling ragged boys out from horses' feet ?'

But it was like her, Phemie Seton. The bairn would travel fifty miles, or want a meal—ay, or risk her life—to do anybody a good turn. But what a story to give her uncle, Sir Archibald Grant, when he comes to us to-night! I could fain not see him, Phemie.'

'But, Janet, if the inheritance is Annie's he will need to leave it—a great trial for the man and his family, if he has one.'

'No doubt, but if he be like his brother, our sister Annie's husband, he will do right at any cost. It is a good race, Phemie Seton; we proved that five-and-twenty years ago,' said Miss Janet, with pride. 'Well, we may as well have our teas, Phemie, and try and keep our minds composed. There's One who is able to take the knots out of the webs human hands ravel so fearfully, and we'll just leave it with Him. We can't say, any way, that He has not hitherto led us and ours.'

They had not quite finished tea, when the door-bell rang, and Miss Janet hurriedly rose.

'He had better just come in here. We need not make a stranger of him, and that drawing-room would chill the marrow in one's bones,' she said, and opening the door, she stepped out into the hall. Her heart was in the right place, and, in spite of her odd ways, she very seldom acted but with tact and delicacy.

'Sir Archibald Grant,' she said tremblingly, 'you are welcome for your brother's sake and for old times' sake. Your name was once familiar enough in the ears of myself and Phemie Seton.'

Sir Archibald, touched with the pathetic warmth of his greeting, took both the pale little hands in his manly grasp, but did not for a moment speak. A true heart all over the world will recognise its fellow. Janet Seton's eyes filled once more as they scanned his handsome face, and saw nobility, not of birth alone, but of soul, stamped on every feature. It

was as if the years had rolled back, and she saw her young sister going forth proudly by the side of her bridegroom ; this Sir Archibald was so like the old.

'I have made no mistake then,' he said, as he shook hands with Miss Phemie in the room. 'You are indeed the sisters of my brother's poor young wife, who received such scant justice from us.'

'Annie Seton was our sister, and though it was a great marriage for her, we thought her worthy of it to the full,' said Miss Janet proudly. 'Oh, Sir Archibald,' she added more hurriedly, 'what is all this we have been reading to-day? We did not know the young creature we have had with us since last summer was our own niece, and St. Veda's heiress. And to think that she was here in all her beautiful health and fairness this morning, and that now'—

'Miss Janet, what do you mean?' cried Sir Archie, leaping to his feet in the intensity of his surprise.

'You have come to seek your niece and ours, have you not?' asked Miss Janet, arrested by his unbounded bewilderment. 'The dear lassie who has been with us so long as Annie Erskine, and whom we only learned to-day from a chance reading of the papers is our own niece.'

'Annie Erskine! Has she been with you all this time? Is it possible?'

'It is true. Did you not know?'

'Know! My dear ladies, this is more than I hoped for. Do you know, my son Archie, who loves her as his own soul, has been seeking her without interruption these five months back?'

Miss Phemie's eyes shone with the most intense interest.

'There was a love affair then?' she said eagerly.

'Yes; my son learned to love her as Annie Erskine, and would have married her as such, bless him! had she not, out of a mistaken unselfishness, for which we were to blame, left him and us. To think that she should have been led to her

mother's kindred ! It surpasses comprehension. How did it come about ? She did not know you, did she ?

'No,' said Miss Janet. 'It came about very simply, like all the Lord's wonderful dealings with the children of men. My sister and I were having our walk in Princes Street Gardens one morning, and Phemie, aye dreaming and thoughtless, left her silver-clasped reticule on the seat. Annie brought it to her, and we entered upon a little talk, and we were sorry for the bairn, though there was that about her which puzzled us, and in the end, Sir Archibald, we took her home with us, and she has been with us, serving for love only, for we were very poor, until now.'

'And where is she now ?'

'That's it ; that's the very worst of all, Sir Archibald. She went away out after our early dinner to-day, for a bit walk to herself, while Phemie Seton and I would have our nap, and the next we heard was a cab sent from the hospital for us, and we have just come back.'

'And what has that to do with Annie ?'

'Too much. She ran in before a gentleman's coach and four to save a ragged boy from being hurt or killed, and, of course, she was knocked down herself.'

'And not—not killed ?' asked Sir Archie, with blanching lips.

'No, but hurt very seriously, I could not but think when I saw her lying so white and still ; though the doctors say there are no bones broken.'

'Could I see her if I were to go ?'

'No, they put me out. They are very unceremonious even with gentlewomen in these strange places. I wish we had our dear bairn at home ; not but what I think she will be well cared for, for the place is clean, and the doctors no doubt skillful men, and that nurse was a well-spoken woman, but the bairn's heart will be hungry for love.'

'There has been enough lavished on her,' said Sir Archie

gravely. 'There is an old man, her father, at Orr's Haven, bending towards the grave for want of her, and our young one's not much better. As for my womenfolk, Miss Seton, they talk of nothing else. There will be a gay Christmas this year at St. Veda's. Annie will have us all to spend it with her, I am sure.'

The ladies looked at Sir Archie a little wonderingly. How kindly and beautifully he spoke of Annie, and of the surrender of what must be very dear to him!

But, after all, they were not very greatly surprised. How could they expect otherwise from one who bore the name of Archibald Grant?

They sat talking until it was late, and parted at length like old, old friends, to meet again in the morning and go together to the hospital to see the maiden whose fortunes were of such deep interest to them all.

'But, do you not think, Sir Archibald,' said Miss Janet thoughtfully, when she went with him to the door, 'do you not think it might be better to have the bairn safely with us here before she should have this great surprise come upon her? In her weak state it could not be good for her, I'm thinking. Phemie and I will go by our two selves to-morrow morning early, and I'll ask that grave-faced doctor about it.'

'I believe you are right, Miss Seton,' assented Sir Archie. 'I have some business to attend to in the morning connected with these impostors. I'll come here in the afternoon, and hear the result of your visit to the hospital.'

'Very well,' said Miss Janet. 'But, Sir Archibald, forgive the curiosity of women folk, but what like folk are these you speak of, and how did they get to know anything at all about your brother and our poor sister?'

'They lived near the sugar plantation at Madras, where my brother was employed. Their real name is Briscoe. She is the widow of some individual who held a small Government post. My friend Bold of the Temple has ferreted out every

item of information about them. It showed a great deal of pluck in them to advance a claim to the estates on the slender proof they possessed.'

'I should call it by another name than pluck,' quoth Miss Janet grimly. 'And what'll be done to them, think you?'

'Oh, nothing. Had the case gone to Court, they would probably have been indicted for perjury. Even had our niece's identity not been proved, they had no case, and it would have gone hard with them. As it is, I fancy they will find it to their advantage to get quietly out of the way as quickly as possible.'

'Dear me, and is *that* all the law can do to folk who have caused other people so much annoyance and expense?' said Miss Janet, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'I don't think much of it. Well, good-night, Sir Archibald. It has done our hearts good to see and speak with you about these old memories. And when, think you, shall we see your son, whose heart is set on our Annie?'

'Before forty-eight hours are passed, I should say,' said Sir Archie, with a smile. 'He is in the middle of election meetings yonder, and will be speaking this very night in the school-room at Ayton, but that won't keep him from coming up when he gets my letter to-morrow.'

'Ay, ay,' said Miss Janet, and a tender little smile softened her face. 'If only all will go as we hope and wish, Sir Archibald, we shall all be happy.'

'We shall see. We can leave the ordering of these things in a higher hand,' said Sir Archie, with his pleasant smile, as he shook hands and went his way.

Before noon next day an ambulance waggon stopped at the door of the house in Abingdon Road, and Annie, who had stepped across its threshold in the vigour and buoyancy of youth twenty-four hours before, was carried in and upstairs to the spacious best bedroom, which Margaret, out of love for the sweet young girl whom it had been a pleasure to serve, had

set all in readiness, with a blazing fire, and every comfort thoughtfulness could suggest.

'Thank you, Margaret. You are a good, thoughtful woman,' Miss Janet found time to whisper. 'I need not ask if the bed is thoroughly aired, because I can trust you.'

The surgeons had not found any specific injury in their patient, and had readily enough granted permission for her to be taken home. To the little sisters it seemed a fearful thing to see the young, active girl reduced to such helplessness that she could not set her foot to the ground, but they were reassured by the surgeon saying that that weakness, the result of the shock and the bruises, would wear off after a few days' rest. Annie was very quiet, very sober, very grateful for the least attention, and though she did not say much, her eyes were eloquent. The little sisters could not leave the room for a moment, in spite of the injunction they had received to keep her quiet. They felt as if their own sister had been restored to them, and Annie, not knowing the secret which oppressed them, only wondered that they should lavish upon her such kindness and love.

'Phemie Seton,' said Miss Janet once, when she beckoned her sister out of the room, 'somebody must tell her. I can't, I'm in such a flutter. Will you?'

'Oh, sister, I can't, at least I should only make a fool of myself, and excite her,' said Miss Phemie, trembling at the very thought.

'Then I'll tell you what'll be best,' said Miss Janet. 'I'll go in and tell her Sir Archie is coming to-day to see her. He has a beautiful, kind, soothing way with him, Phemie, and he'll tell her.'

So saying, Miss Janet marched once more into the room.

'Is that you, Miss Janet?' asked Annie, in her low, sweet voice.

'Yes, my lamb, I'm here.'

'My lamb,' repeated Annie, and a faint sweet smile came

on her lips. 'That's what father used to call me. Did you send word to him to come?'

'I didn't, my dearie, but somebody else did—a dear, kind friend we all love, and who is coming very soon to see you. You will be pleased, will you not, dear Annie, to see so old a friend as Sir Archie Grant? Don't flush up so, darling. You belong to us, but he has our confidence, and he has the right to see you, to take you in his arms, if he likes. Why, there is his foot on the stair.'

There was a low knock at the door, and Miss Janet tremblingly bade him come in.

'Oh, Annie, Annie, what a dance you have led us!' said Sir Archie, shaking his finger and trying to speak lightly because his heart was full. And to Annie's bewilderment, for she could not understand it at all, he bent over her and kissed her as if she had been a daughter of his own.



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CHAPTER XXXIII.

GOOD NEWS.

THE old skipper, they were saying in the Haven, had greatly failed of late. Janet Erskine heard two neighbour women remark it to each other one winter morning, and the words sent a chill to her heart. She went out to the open door, and looked down the pier after him, and was painfully struck by his bent shoulders and slouching feebleness of gait. Why, it seemed but yesterday that she had watched him with all the pride of her heart, her tall, manly husband, who always seemed to stand distinguished even among the race of sturdy fishers as the sturdiest and most stalwart of all. He was like a tree bending before the wind, and she knew that the sorrow in his heart was the cause of this change. He had never held up his head since the day—now five months gone—Annie left Orr's Haven. Since that night when he fancied he saw her 'wraith' at the garden gate, he had never once mentioned her name. Janet his wife knew that he had buried it in his heart; that he believed Annie to be dead. Janet Erskine was to be pitied. Her loneliness was terrible. There was an outer semblance of peace between her and her husband. But she knew that he had weighed her in the balance and found her wanting; that she had fallen from her former high place in his esteem. She even imagined that his love had turned to dislike; but that



was not the case. He was still awaiting her repentance, and wrestling with the Lord in prayer for her soul. In his long, silent, brooding hours he fancied that his days were numbered, that soon he would be called to take his last voyage; he prayed to live to see Janet a changed woman. That was all he wished; for Adam was doing his duty by God and his fellowmen, and seemed to have got over his sore trouble about Annie. The skipper's sorrow about his wife was like hers, awful in its solitariness, because he could not share it with another. Neither would desecrate their inner sanctuary by laying its secret lore to any alien eye. They thought too sacredly of the tie between husband and wife. Both believed that none but God should lift that veil.

There were tears in Janet Erskine's eyes as, after seeing her husband disappear down the cabin of the boat, she turned about and went into the house. The kettle was singing on the hob, and the teapot warming on the side of the grate. They had not had their breakfast yet. There was no hurry on these dark winter mornings, when there was so little doing out of doors. Janet infused the tea, set on the water for the eggs, and then sat down on her low chair and folded her hands. Of late she had taken to sitting thus idly, brooding and dreaming; indeed, all the way of life in the cottage seemed to have undergone a change. She was still sitting with her eyes fixed on the fire when her husband's shadow darkened the doorway; then she sprang up, and turned to him with visible anxiety on her face.

'Adam Erskine, my man, are ye quite well?' she asked kindly.

'Ou, ay, well enouch, Janet. Is the breakfast ready?'

'Yes, it's ready, but ye're no' ready for it, I know,' she said.

'I'm growing anxious about ye, Adam.'

'Ye needna fash. I've nae complaint,' answered Adam quietly. 'Whaur's the lad?'

'In the yard. I'll bid him come,' said Janet; but as she

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passed by her husband's chair, she lingered by it, and her eyes dwelt upon his rugged face. Oh, it *was* changed; there were empty hollows where formerly it had been round and ruddy, and his eyes seemed far sunken in his head.

'What are ye glowerin' at, my wummin?' he asked, not unkindly.

'At you. You're no' well, Adam, my man. You'll let me send for the doctor the day.'

'A doctor'll dae me nae guid, Janet. It's no' bodily ail that I hae, at least that I'm aware o'. If only I kenn'd whaur an' hoo the bairn de'ed. Oh, wife, this has been an unco trial to my weak faith! It's like to get the better o' me a'thegither.'

Janet Erskine shook from head to foot. She stepped back, shut to the kitchen door, and knelt on one knee by the skipper's chair.

'Adam, my man, I'm a miserable woman too, and mine is harder, because I've sin to weigh me down as well. *Will* you forgive me what I did to Annie?'

'Dinna trust to me, my wummin. I'm no' the Judge o' the earth,' said the skipper, but his eye dwelt with a peculiar kindness on his wife's bowed head. 'Eh, Janet, if ye had but lippened a wee mair to the Lord, a' this heartbreak might hae been saved you an' me.'

Janet was weeping now; her frame was shaken with her strong sobbing. The floodgates of her pent-up soul were opened at last. The sight moved the skipper. He put his arms round her as he had been wont to do in the old time, and soothed her as he might have done a child; but his own eyes were not dry.

'I have been a wicked, hard-hearted woman, but not so bad, not quite so bad as you thought. I did not know what was in the box until quite lately—the night the young Laird told you about the folk seeking the estate. Do you believe me, Adam?'

'Ay, but it was a fell mistak' ye made aboot the box frae

the beginnin', my wummin. Ye micht hae kent naething but ill could come o't. Hidden things are the deil's, Janet, an' should be carefully haundlet.'

'Oh, I know it all too well, Adam Erskine. The torments I have endured dwelling by myself in this quiet house have been something like what we are told of in the Bible. I think folks get a part of their punishment here.'

'Nae doot, nae doot. Weel, we'll let bygones be bygones, my wummin, an' try an' live the last half o' the pilgrimage better nor the first. An' if it be but short, sae muckle the better. It's no' the world we thocht it when we were young.'

These words struck Janet most painfully. Why, not six months ago, the skipper was as full of fun and nonsense as a laddie, and had rejiced like a young thing in the sunshine and all that was bright and gay. Oh, with what sharp, unavailing regret did she view her own actions now! Oh, to recall that past six months, to undo the mischief which had been wrought in them! Ah, Janet, too late, too late is thy remorse!

'Adam,' she said, with a gentleness wonderful to see, 'I feel somehow as if we would see Annie again some day, and Adam doesn't think either that she is dead. I heard Mr. Archie and him talking of her the other night at the garden gate, and that was what he said.'

'Weel, weel, maybe. It's the way o' youth to be hopeful, Janet, an' I wadna be takin' that sma' bit o' comfort frae the lads. I'm thankfu' to see them forgethert again. Thon was an ill time wi' oor Adam, wife. I was fell anxious aboot him,' said the skipper, as he rose to his feet. 'Eh me! there's the young Laird fleelin' like a daft crater up frae the shore. Fegs he's no' very like a Member o' Parliament. What can he be after noo, I wonder?'

'He's coming here,' said Janet, and set the door open. Just then Adam sauntered round from the yard, and the young men met at the front door step.

'Hullo, Adam! your father in, eh?' cried young Archie; and, being much excited, brushed past Adam and burst into the kitchen.

'News, news, skipper! Annie's all right. They've found her; and she's been as jolly as possible all the time,' he cried, waving his cap in the air. 'And you and me are to come up to London to-day. So you'll need to get into your best, skipper, and be ready to drive with me to Berwick at half-past ten.'

'Annie safe!'

The skipper heard no more. He said these words over and over again to himself, while the tears rolled down his rugged cheeks like rain.

'Ay, safe enough. Sit down skipper, and you, Adam, and I'll read my father's letter. He had only time to send a few lines to me before the mail last night, and tells me to come down at once with it to you. Listen,—

' "U.S. CLUB, PAUL MALL,
' "December 2, 18—.

"MY DEAR BOY,—I have found Annie. I purposely write that first, knowing it will be all the news you care for; and, yet, the details may not be uninteresting. As you know, I came up here to have an interview with the Misses Seton, the sisters of poor Archie's wife. I found them at Kensington—fine old ladies, thorough gentlewomen, and with hearts of gold. Annie has been with them since last August; led to them when she went to Edinburgh, I cannot doubt, through the providence and mercy of God. They took her as a servant, but I can see have never treated her as such, though neither they nor she had the remotest idea of the relationship between them. They have just come into a fortune, and times were changing for the little household which had known deep poverty. There is one drawback, a shadow in this happy reunion. Annie has met with an accident in attempting to

rescue a street arab from a drag near Hyde Park. She looks pale and ill, but the surgeons say there is no serious injury. But she will not be able to come down for a week or two. I saw her last night, and told her her own history. She was quite overcome, but very humble and gentle, and unassuming. The difficulty I now foresee will be to get her to take her rightful place. I suppose I need not bid you come. I expect you up to-morrow night. Your name, however, has not been mentioned between Annie and me. But I see her heart is hungering to see the old skipper. Bring him up without fail. Stay behind yourself rather than leave him. *Your* time will come. Bold saw the quondam Lady Grant last night. Her real name is Briscoe. She is the widow of a Government petty official in India, and lived near your poor uncle's temporary home. She received the few mementoes of him which she had in her possession from Mrs. Mathers, to whom Annie's mother gave them as a parting token of regard and gratitude. Mrs. Mathers is now dead. She has delivered up these trinkets to Bold, who has put a wholesome fear upon her. Mother and son left London, I am told, to-day. I must close. Only three minutes till the bag leaves. Love to mamma and Ethel. Wire when to expect you. Don't forget the skipper, to whom you must read this.—Your affectionate father,

“ARCHIBALD GRANT.”

‘Now, isn't that a wonderful story?’ cried Archie, in gleeful triumph; but nobody had a word to say. The skipper, sitting on the broad window-ledge beside Annie's withered house plants, had his eyes turned out to sea. But there was a wonderful glory on his fine face, which revealed the unspeakable content in his heart. He was blessing the Lord in that deep silence for His goodness to the children of men, and asking forgiveness for the meagreness of his faith.

‘And Annie has been with her own aunts all this time,’ said Janet Erskine slowly; ‘it is wonderful, most wonderful!’

'Yes, it is,' said Archie, and looked even at her with a kindly eye. Ah, joy can heal many a bitter sting.

'Janet, my wummin, get out my Sawbath claes,' said the skipper blithely. 'Half-past ten, did you say, Laird? an' when wull we get to Lunnon?'

'About seven at night, skipper,' answered Archie gaily. 'Well, I'll go. Be at the lodge gates at five-and-twenty minutes past ten, will you?'

'Ay will I,' answered the skipper, and his eyes shone. Janet looked at him, and her heart throbbed. Even yet, though her heart was softened, she grudged Annie that deep, yearning, unaltered love.

It was a curious thing how, in the midst of their joy they paid so little heed to the fact that Annie was lying weak and ill. She was found—she was safe and alive—that seemed sufficient at the time.

The skipper had not much to say after the Laird left; indeed, that breakfast was a very silent meal.

When it was over, Janet went into the room and laid out her husband's best attire, the fine blue cloth suit he wore on Sundays, a spotless linen shirt, and the blue silk handkerchief with the white border, on which Annie's loving hands had sewed his name. Her heart was sore as she laid out the things one by one. She was left out in the cold. There was not even a message for her, though her heart too was hungering for Annie. If she had dared, she would have asked to share this sudden journey; but she felt that she had not deserved to be remembered. If Annie thought of her at all, it could only be with aversion and resentment. She misjudged the child again as she had so often done. In Annie's sweet, wholesome nature, there was no room for such dark thoughts. When she reviewed her past life at the cottage, she always blamed herself most, and reproached herself with her own undutiful conduct.

The skipper, even in the bustle of his preparations, noticed

his wife's downcast, wistful look, and understood her feelings. As for Adam, he was off to the boat. Poor lad, perhaps his case was the hardest. He had not forgotten Annie, and nobody had a word for him. But he could bear his pain manfully; he would not let it cloud the happiness of others.

'Weel, lass, an' what am I to say to Annie, frae ye?' asked the skipper cheerily, as he stood ready to go.

'Tell her, tell her'— But Janet's voice faltered. 'Tell her when she comes down to St. Veda's, I will come to see her, an' that we'll redd it up between us. Tell her, if ye like, that I've never known a moment's peace or an hour's sound sleep since she went away, and that I'll never forgive myself.'

'That's my true wife, my Janet,' said the skipper, and he kissed her for the first time for years. They were not a demonstrative pair; but there is a love which stands the test of time without the outward symbols.

Janet had a good cry by herself when her husband left; but her heart was lighter than it had been for many months. When she began to move about the house again she caught sight of Adam standing against the mast of the *Janet Rae* in a listless attitude, with his arms folded across his breast. Her motherly heart filled for him; the lad had had his own battle to fight, and how nobly and yet how silently he bore his cross! So Janet learned a lesson that grey morning from her own son.

Never had journey seemed so intolerably long as did that run to London that day to the two impatient travellers. But at length it came to an end, and a hansom soon took them through the busy thoroughfares to Abingdon Road. The skipper had never been in London, but it might as well have been the wilds of Siberia for all the interest it had for him. In the meantime it was only the place which held Annie; that was his only thought. They were expected at Abingdon Road. Miss Phemie came fluttering into the hall to meet them, and instantly, as was her romantic, old way, fell in love with them

both. There was something in the old fisherman's rugged, weather-beaten face, a glance in his honest eye, and a noble manliness in his whole bearing, which proclaimed him one of Nature's gentlemen. He was not embarrassed, as a meaner nature might have been, by his surroundings; he carried himself with a simple dignity, affecting nothing, pretending nothing, and so, while making others happy, he was himself perfectly at ease. A tempting 'high tea' was spread for the travellers in the dining-room, but they did scanty justice to it. Before they were quite done, however, Miss Janet came down from the upper room to welcome the travellers from Scotland.

'Annie has been asleep, but she awoke up when you came in. I thought she should have jumped out of bed when she heard your voice, Captain Erskine,' she said, laying her sweet white hand on the skipper's broad shoulder. Her heart warmed to him, he was so honest and true.

'Will you come up now?'

'If ye please, m'am,' said the skipper, rising from his chair.

'No, no, my lad; it's not your turn yet,' she said, with a gentle laugh, and shaking her forefinger at young Archie, who was on his feet in a moment. 'The bairn has never once asked for you, but this dear man's name is never off her lips.'

Archie laughed a little ruefully and sat down again, oblivious of the look of deep sympathy Miss Phemie cast upon him.

So Miss Janet and the skipper went away upstairs, and those listening heard the opening and shutting of the door; and presently she came down again with a very solemn, beautiful look on her face.

'Did you go in, sister?' asked Miss Phemie nervously.

'No, Phemie Seton,' answered Miss Janet, in a soft, tremulous voice; 'with such joy no stranger may intermeddle.'



CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SWEET WATERS.



DOUBT, Miss Seton, if Annie gets on as slowly as she has been doing during the past week, there is little chance of that jolly Christmas we have been promising ourselves at St. Veda's.

It was Sir Archie who spoke, and his face was gravely troubled. Miss Janet started to find her own thoughts expressed in words. She did not know till that moment how real was her anxiety about the bairn.

'Sir Archie, what are we to do with the bairn? She has no strength,' she said almost piteously.

Sir Archie took two turns across the dining-room floor before he answered.

'Tell me what you think, Miss Seton? You are her nurse, you know, and should have a better idea than I. Does she complain of any special pain?'

There was a sobbing breath in Miss Janet's kind voice when she spoke.

'Yesterday, Sir Archie, I persuaded her to get up and try to walk across the floor, leaning on my arm. She couldn't do it, Sir Archie, and I fear, I fear there is something we don't understand. It's her back. She has a constant weariness in it, and she seems perfectly contented to lie still.'

'It is that which has alarmed me, Miss Janet. The child

who used to be with us at Orr's Haven was so different. She was as restless and full of life as the winds and the sea she loved so well. I can see, though he is saying nothing, that Adam Erskine is growing anxious too.'

'Then we must have some of the great doctors to see her at once,' said Miss Janet.

'This very day. It is a dear, precious life which none of us can spare,' said Sir Archie with emotion. 'I hope, I hope for all our sakes, that our fears are groundless.'

'There is a want of interest in the affairs of life about her I don't like. Have you noticed, Sir Archie, how quiet she is whenever her inheritance is spoken of? She will only smile a bit quiet smile and say nothing. It is not natural in a young girl.'

'No, it is unnatural. I have noticed it, and it has deepened my anxiety. It is something more than her natural fine feeling, though it is very rare in its delicacy. It looks to me as if she thought she should never live to inherit her own. She has never hinted at such a thing to you, has she?'

'Not in words,' Miss Janet answered, as she wiped her eyes. 'But I'll not deny that I have felt sometimes exactly as if that were in her thoughts. Oh, surely, brother, God has not taken the knots out of our ravelled thread just to tie another we cannot understand. It seems to me that it would only be just and right that Annie should have some of the brightness in life that young creatures love. Although I am not for the marrying of cousins, I wish—I wish I could live to see your fine son and our bairn man and wife.'

The little sisters claimed Annie entirely, and called her 'their bairn' in the very face of Sir Archie, and even of the skipper himself. As for Annie, she would lie listening to their bantering talk with a smile for all, and love for all in her heart. But when she was alone with the skipper she would nestle her soft cheek on his toil-worn palm, and whisper

to him that she loved him best. What that whispered assurance was to old Adam Erskine I cannot try to tell you. His very heart clave to the bairn with the strength of a mighty love.

'Well, I think, Miss Janet, I shall see one of the leading surgeons to-day,' said Sir Archie. 'If there is not much wrong, we might take her down to St. Veda's soon. Any way, it will set our minds at rest.'

'Very well,' said Miss Janet, but there was a curious feeling of apprehension in her heart. 'It will be better to know, for isn't it time you and young Archie and the skipper were back to your respective duties?' she added, with a slight smile.

'The lad won't go till Annie goes,' answered Sir Archie, smiling a little too. 'He has not been here to-day?'

'Not yet.'

'Is the skipper with Annie?'

'No; he went out to meet Archie, you know, to go down to Gravesend. They will be up presently.'

'Ah, then, I'll go round to Carlton House Terrace, and see if Jenner is to be had. You had better tell Annie we are having some one else to see her.'

'It will not put her about; the bairn has a wonderful placid temperament for one so young.' Miss Janet did not know, dear heart, of the fierce battling which had won for Annie that quiet peace.

What the bairn had suffered in mind and heart of late would never be known to any of those who loved her. Her intense, passionate, sensitive nature had had its own full share of pain. Perhaps the long struggle had worn her out, and she craved only for rest.

When Sir Archie left the house, Miss Janet went away up with slow and reluctant step to the sick-room. A weight was on her kind heart; she feared the sight of Annie's sweet face would break her down. She heard her laugh as she came

near the door. Miss Phemie was sitting by the sofa amusing her with her quaint talk.

'You two seem very gay,' said Miss Janet briskly, as she bustled into the room. 'I'm glad to hear you laughing, my dear. That was your Uncle Archie asking for you.'

'And has he gone away without coming up to see me, Aunt Janet?'

'He is coming back again, my dearie. How are you feeling this afternoon?'

'Quite well.'

'But lazy, eh? Not thinking of getting up to-day, I suppose.'

'No, Aunt Janet, please; if you will let me, I would rather lie still.'

'Well, well, lie still, then, you idle bairn,' said Aunt Janet. 'But if you are not going to make an attempt to get up, when are we to get you down to your Castle by the sea?'

Annie's colour rose, and she shook her head.

'Oh, there is time enough. I have lived long enough without the Castle by the sea, Aunt Janet, and I am very happy here with you all. I shall see the rest by and by.'

'Ay, but you are keeping three men folk from their work, lassie,' said Miss Janet with a laugh. 'You bit white-faced thing, that you should keep us all running about you. Uncle Archie is away on no less errand than to get a grand doctor with a title to come and order you to get up. He may be here very soon.'

'Very well, auntie,' said Annie placidly. 'Now, Aunt Phemie, tell the rest of the story about old Colonel Cawdor and his cats.'

'Phemie Seton, are you filling the bairn's head with that fearsome, silly story?' said Miss Janet. 'Ye are just a pair; maybe ye'll live to make young folk laugh at ye yet, Annie, my lamb; and the man's head was turned with the sorrows of his youth. Here's somebody that'll put an end to Colonel

Cawdor, or I'm mistaken. Yes, my man, you can come in.'

It was sweet to see the bright red flushing Annie's pale cheek as she turned her head to greet her cousin. As for Archie, his glance of utter adoration sent another cold chill to Janet Seton's heart. Oh, it is not wise to make idols of human beings; we hold life and love by such a fearfully slender thread. The little sisters slipped away out of the room by and by, for they said that the young man wished a few words with his cousin. He had not been very well used by them, perhaps; his private words with Annie had been conspicuously few, and certainly no word of love had ever passed between them yet.

'How are you, Annie?—*why* do you keep on lying there?' he asked, the moment the door was shut on them.

'Because I can't walk,' she answered; 'and it is very nice to be lazy and lie still.'

'But why can't you walk?' he asked, with all the old boyish impetuosity. 'I can't understand it.'

'Neither can I. I suppose I got a good many hard bruises. I shall be better by and by!'

'And all for a little beggar whose parents would likely have been better pleased to see the last of him. Annie, you had no right to be so reckless with your precious life. Don't you see how important you are in the eyes of a lot of people?'

An exquisite smile made a halo on the girl's sweet face. Her need of love was very great—that chalice could never be too full.

'It is—it is splendid to feel oneself dear to others,' she said, with a long-drawn breath. 'I never knew what it was to *live* before.'

'And yet *I* loved you in the old days, Annie,' said the young man reproachfully.

'Yes, I know,' she answered simply, and her eyes met his

with a look of perfect trust. But somehow it was not exactly the look he craved for.

'Annie, is this going to part us, I wonder?' he cried quickly. 'Of course, I know, there is a great difference between us now, greater than there was before, because the world has no mercy on the man who may owe anything to his wife. It brands him without remorse as a coward and a self-seeker. I have seen many brave spirits crushed under it, until even love could scarcely stand the weight on it. Annie, I don't grudge you your inheritance, I am glad to go forth nameless and penniless for your sake; but when I have made my name and my fortune, you will let me lay them at your feet?'

'Hush! hush!' His hot, impassioned words pained her. The tears started in her eyes. She put her hand under her pillows and brought out a little packet tied with a ribbon.

'I had a letter from Ethel to-day, and I have written to her,' she said in a voice which trembled a little. Then she took from the ribbon a little roll of paper.

'I have kept that. It was my comfort when I had nothing else,' she whispered, and laid it in his hand. He opened it out, and when he saw his own face drawn, as he remembered, by his sister's skilful hand, his own tears started. He was not ashamed of them—they were no dishonour to his manhood.

'Then you *are* my darling?' he said, and put one strong arm round her drooping shoulders, and bent his handsome head close down to hers.

'You will remember I said I never would forget that you had loved me,' she said after a time. 'Did you think I should recognise any difference? It is a greater honour now than it was then.'

'Then it is we two against the world,' said Archie. 'They will say we have made this marriage among us to keep ourselves right. There is no mercy in people's hearts, Annie; they will *not* give credit for any good motive.'

'Let them talk,' said Annie quietly. 'When they are "redding us up," as Auntie Janet says, they are leaving somebody else in peace, and perhaps they will be sorry some day for saying what is neither kind nor true.'

So they talked—Archie full of hope and glowing visions of the bright future; Annie very quiet, but perfectly happy and at rest. If she did not join much in his planning, he did not notice it until after, when memory was all he had to comfort him.

It was very noticeable to them all that Annie would not talk about the strange chain of circumstances which had made her the heiress to a great estate. She never of her own will alluded to St. Veda's, or to her relationship with the Grants. She changed Sir Archie into Uncle Archie at his request, but the name did not often pass her lips. It was not, dear heart, that she loved them less, but she feared to remind them of all they had lost through her. In her long hours of silence she never ceased to wonder that they should be so good, and should love her with such an unselfish love. The sweeter revelations of life were opening up before her; and, oh, there *are* many precious things left to us! Human nature, thank God, is not an ignoble, despicable thing, as some would have us believe. The image of the Creator has not been stamped in vain on the creature. Sometimes the human gives forth a faint shadowing of the Divine.

Before the short day had waned, Sir Archie returned to Abingdon Road with the great man whose verdict was of such priceless value. He had a grave, sympathetic, beautiful face, looking as if he felt the magnitude of his responsibility and the precious nature of his privileges. He was not only a healer of the body, but a healer of the mind; what tortures of anxiety and fear he had been able in his day to remove from the hearts of his fellow-creatures!

He was very kind, very gentle with his young patient, and was won by her sweetness of look and demeanour. When his

examination was made, he went down to the dining-room, where Sir Archie was waiting.

'You wish my plain opinion, I suppose, Sir Archibald?'

Sir Archie nodded.

'Then I am gravely concerned. I fear there is serious internal injury.'

Sir Archie started. Although anxious, he had not expected any such confirmation of his fears.

'I am afraid for the spine, but she is young and has a good constitution. You will need to guard her very carefully.'

'There is no immediate danger?'

'I do not apprehend it. But I should like to see her again in a few weeks' time. Is she to remain in London?'

'We were anxious to remove her to St. Veda's. If—if—she should not recover, it may be well she should be in her own home.'

'Very well, take her down. No, the journey will not hurt her. If necessary I can easily go that length to see her. She is a sweet girl, apart from her romantic history. I am deeply interested in her. I see, my friend, you are feeling it a good deal. But I have not said absolutely that there is no hope.'

Sir Archie felt he could not face the others just then. He put on his hat and accompanied the surgeon to his carriage, and then walked on down the road. Meanwhile the skipper had sought his way to Annie's room. He found her quiet, composed, cheerful, not in the least troubled or anxious about the surgeon's visit.

No smile was ever sweeter than that which greeted the old man as he came softly across the floor, and sat down by the couch.

'Where have you been to-day, father?'

'At Gravesend, my lammie, seein' the ships; but I thoct aboot little else but you,' he answered, as he folded her hand in his,

'An' what did the great doctor say till ye? When are ye to rise an' rin about as ye used to do?'

'He didn't say, father; he was very kind and very good. Oh, how sweet it is to live where all is love!' she said, and there was a little silence. Annie turned her head away then, and looked through the long window to where the December sun was sinking redly to his rest. A wonderful light streamed out of the radiant west, and lay in a soft glow on the girl's sweet, pure face. The skipper saw her lips move, and felt that she had forgotten him for a moment. Then his head fell on his breast, and a great trembling shook him. Annie turned swiftly, and crept closer into his arms, until her white cheek lay against his broad breast. Not a word was spoken, but each understood the other. Adam Erskine had not heard the surgeon's verdict, but his hope was quenched, and from that hour he gave his darling up.





CHAPTER XXXV.

SETTING HER HOUSE IN ORDER.

SPRING had come, though late, bright with the promise of the year. During the early months wild eastern gales swept the coast, nipping with their icy breath the young green shoots, and withering the early blossoms almost ere they saw the light. But ere March closed a genial wind rose out of the west; the dull grey sky became dappled with tender clouds, and the spring sun awoke all the earth to life and love. Birds and bees, and human creatures who loved the light, rejoiced in a new lease of life, all save one.

The green young shoots of the ivy creeping about the wide, low windows of a large and pleasant room in the western wing of St Veda's looked in upon a very pale, worn young face, which, however, wore ever an expression of sweet content.

She was oftenest by the window, where she could see not only the tossing, far-spreading sea, with the low coast-line and the further chain of hills, but also the little hamlet nestling under the shadow of the Castle rock, where the fisher folk lived their quiet lives, unheeding of the great world beyond them. Her own Castle! her own folk! Alas! the young mistress of St. Veda's had only come home to her own to die. She had never thought otherwise since that bleak December day in London when the truth had been revealed,

as in a flash of light, to herself and the skipper. They had never spoken of it again, and the many who loved her spoke and acted as if she were but temporarily laid aside, but I question if any of them were deceived. For the days had glided imperceptibly away, and, instead of any increase of strength, there was a growing weakness—a greater desire to be quiet and still—a gradual weaning, as it were, of even thought from the things of time. I do not say that this process was devoid of its pain and heaviness for the young creature called to bear this peculiar cross. She was very young; life was all before her, and surely no life had ever had a fairer promise; and yet strength came with renunciation, victory after silent struggles which were known only to herself and God.

With the advent of the glorious spring the longing to be as of yore, a partaker in all its glad promise, sometimes fretted her quiet heart; but that passed also, and she rejoiced in what could be seen from the sunny window, and counted the many mercies which surrounded her. I would tell you if I could of the sweet influence which went forth from that sick-room, and wrought silent and beautiful changes even in what had ever been a united and happy household. The little sisters had shut up both their houses, and were at St. Veda's also. There never was any talk of their leaving; they were waiting, though it was never said, for whatever issue was to ensue.

The skipper spent a great part of his time—every leisure moment, indeed—with his bairn. But in the spring she missed him much, for the busy season began, and the fleet was always out. It was one of her chief interests to watch the outgoing and the incoming of the boats, and to have her white flag of peace ready at the window to welcome the *Janet Rae* back to port. Adam Erskine the younger came sometimes, but not often, to the Castle to see Annie. He was not able to bear it; it was better for him to stay away. As for Janet, she was a changed woman. She would have gone

down on her knees to save Annie; her utter and absolute devotion, coming from such as she, had a very touching element in it. There had been one scene between them, just after Annie's return to the Castle, which I dare not attempt to describe. There was no one present, and no one ever knew what passed, but Janet Erskine came out of that room a better and a more God-fearing woman. She had been given a hard lesson, but Annie's sweet faith had helped her through. It was a fearful punishment for the woman to see Annie lying helpless there, and to feel that the thing lay at her door. It was her doing entirely, she told herself; but for her, Annie would never have been away from the Haven.

Janet Erskine would carry that burden with her to the grave, but I believe the very magnitude and bitterness of her sorrow was good for her. Some of us need to be trained in a very hard school. Annie was lying on her sofa one sunny afternoon, while Ethel read aloud to her from a book of poetry. Aunt Janet was sewing in the little corner window, but not listening; she was thinking of something else.

'Are you tired, Annie?' asked Ethel, flinging down the book presently, and sitting down on the edge of the couch. It was sometimes a terrible effort for Ethel to keep her composure when she looked on Annie's face. Perhaps Ethel, most of all, could sympathize with the weakness and weariness of her days. They were very dear to each other; the old-time love had received a closer, dearer renewal by the tie of kinship. They were cousins, not in name only, but in heart.

'No, dear, I am not tired, only thinking. Do you think Uncle Archie is in? Would you go and see, Ethel, please?'

'Yes, he is in, I know. He was in the library when I went for this book. Shall I tell him to come up now?'

'If you please.'

'I am going to speak on business matters to Uncle Archie, Aunt Janet,' said Annie, with a gleam of her old-time smile.

'Very dry matters, indeed.'

'And you want me out of the road, bairn, eh?' said Miss Janet comically, as she gathered up her seam.

'Well, auntie, if you don't mind. I think I could speak better to him if we were quite by ourselves,' said Annie gently. 'I have been thinking a great deal about a lot of things to-day, and I want them all put right.'

Miss Janet turned her face away, and her kind mouth quivered.

'Just go into the drawing-room. Tea will be up, I am sure, and you know how Aunt Phemie longs for it. Aunt Lily will be down; I heard her foot a little ago.'

'Ye have a fell job with your aunties, my lamb,' said Miss Janet, trying to make her joke, and glad at that moment of Sir Archie's entrance, so that she might escape.

'Well, Annie, here I am,' said Sir Archie, in his cheery fashion. 'At your command, my lady, like the rest of this obedient household.'

'Well, you *will* all wait on me,' she said, with a little laugh. 'Well, Uncle Archie, if I had only my feet for five minutes some day, what a dance I should lead you!'

'Quite likely,' said Sir Archie. 'We would be glad of the dance, my child, if we could but see you on your feet again. Are these glorious days not going to tempt you, I wonder?'

'They *do* tempt me, but I just lie still and watch the sun on the waves, and think of the days when the *Spitfire* used to sail into all the sunny corners. Father was saying she had broken up at the Kelpie's Cove. Isn't it a pity?'

'Oh, the thing was done years ago! It's a wonder she hadn't the drowning of some of you,' said Sir Archie. 'Can't I bring you a cup of tea? I heard the clatter as I passed by the drawing-room door.'

'Not yet. Will you sit down, Uncle Archie, and let me speak to you?' she said quite gravely. 'About some very important business.'

'Well, little woman, what is it?'

'It is about—about St. Veda's,' she said, with flushing face. 'I don't like to speak about it as mine. I have done nothing to deserve it. It is yours now, Uncle Archie, but—but there are some things I want to know about.'

'Well, my darling, what are they?'

'After I am gone, Uncle Archie, the estates will be yours, will they not?'

Sir Archie bowed his head; he could not trust himself to speak.

'And after you are done with them, they will be Archie's, won't they?'

'Yes, my child.'

'And the other place, Uncle Archie. Is it entailed?—does it pass like the other from father to son?'

'It has done hitherto; but it is independent of St. Veda's, and could be disposed of as the possessor wills. It was only bought in my grandfather's lifetime.'

'And could I give it to any one I like, Uncle Archie? Don't look so grieved. If I know these things it will make my mind easier.'

'Mount Meldrum is yours, Annie; you can do what you like with it.'

'Then what must I do to—to make my will?' she asked with a smile, as she laid her pale hand in her uncle's.

'Annie, what does all this mean?' he cried huskily. 'Are you feeling worse, my child?'

'No, no; only, Uncle Archie, I think it is time we knew I shall never be better. I—I shall not be very long among you, uncle, and there are some things I should like done, so that I can be ready.'

Sir Archie turned his head away and groaned aloud. It is no exaggeration to say he would willingly have changed places with her. Death seems so cruel to the young. We forget that he is only the harbinger of life.

'Hush, Uncle Archie. Don't grieve so; it is all right,' she

said bravely. 'Much better than if I were to lie here for years. *That* would be terrible. Come, tell me how I must make my will.'

'You must see Purves.'

'Oh yes; I never thought of that. Could I see him to-night?'

'You could, of course; but, my darling, why this haste? There is no need.'

'It will please me. If it is not too much trouble, uncle, let Mr. Purves come to-night.'

'Very well; he shall be sent for,' said Sir Archie, and there was a little silence.

'Are you not going to ask what I am to do with Mount Meldrum, Uncle Archie?' she said at length, almost playfully.

'I can think of nothing, Annie, but of you,' he said quickly.

'It is for Ethel I want Mount Meldrum, uncle. She is not strong, and it will always be her home. You will allow me to do this, will you?'

'I cannot hinder you if I would, my darling; but you are too generous to me and mine.'

'Am I?' Her lips trembled as she spoke, and she laid her cheek down on his hand, and again there was a little silence.

'We will do that to-night then, uncle, and Ethel need never know,' said Annie presently. 'I had a letter this morning from Archie, uncle. Parliament rises on Friday, he says, and he will be here on Saturday.'

'Yes; I know.'

Sir Archie's words were few, and somewhat abrupt, but his heart was wrung with pain.

'It is a beautiful letter. How nobly he is working! I am proud of my cousin, and he will be Sir Archie some day. Won't that be far better, uncle, than having a woman in St. Veda's?'

'No, no!' Sir Archie shook his head.

'It is a beautiful letter; but it has made my heart ache. Uncle Archie, may I talk to you just as I do to father? He *will* write as if I were getting well. He says to-day he is working for the fame and future he promised me, and that they do not seem so very far away. I have written to him to-day, and told him that he must not work less nobly because I shall never share what he may win.'

'My poor boy!'

'But, Uncle Archie, it is better—far better. He will not forget me; but some day he will bring a dear wife here, and they will remember their poor cousin, and talk of her with kindly regret. It is better that we should be only cousins. I have told him so, but he will not listen.'

'The lad loves you. He will never seek another, I believe,' said Sir Archie quickly.

A beautiful smile hovered about Annie's sweet mouth. Perhaps the assurance was very precious, for her heart had long been given, with all its weight of womanly love, into her cousin's keeping, and could never be recalled.

'Is there anything else, Annie? Are you going to leave anything to your aunts, or to those in the Haven?'

'Nothing, nothing to any of these, Uncle Archie, but such little things of mine as they may wish to keep, and my love. Oh, I can leave that to them all, and they know it.'

'Nothing to the skipper, Annie?'

Annie shook her head.

'What could repay him? We have talked about it sometimes, and I know his heart. But, yes, there is one other thing—a new lifeboat for the people in the Haven. It is to be my last gift to them. Father and I have talked of that, and it is to be called the *Annie Erskine*.'

Sir Archie stooped down and kissed his niece on the lips, and walked away out of the room. As he shut the door, a sob broke from his lips, and Annie heard it, and knew something of what was passing in his heart.

She was not long left alone ; in a moment Aunt Janet was in with her cup of tea, and sat on her couch while she drank it, looking at her niece with mournful, affectionate eyes.

'You look very well pleased like, Annie,' she said jokingly. 'Have Uncle Archie and you had a by-ordinary nice crack ?'

'By-ordinary,' laughed Annie. 'Oh, that tea is nice ! Will you look out, auntie, and see whether the boats are coming back. I hope the *Janet Rae* comes in before I sleep.'

'There is no sign of her yet, though I see some far-away things sailing on the sea,' said Miss Janet. 'Are you wearying already to see father, bairn ?'

Nobody resented or grudged the privileges the old man had, nor thought it strange that the young mistress of St. Veda's should call the old skipper by such a dear name. No change of fortune could ever make any change between these two.

The messenger sent to Ayton brought Mr. Purves back with him in the trap, and before dinner that evening, Annie had made her will. She was not in the least excited or troubled about it ; indeed, her placid demeanour amazed them all. Even the stern man of business was deeply moved.

She signed her name Annie Orr-Grant at the foot of the document, her own signature, for the first and last time.

After the lawyer was gone, she asked that her couch might be drawn nearer the window, so that she could watch the boats coming in. They came sailing along in the red-gold path made by the sunset, a goodly fleet, with the *Janet Rae* at their head ; and when Annie saw father's boat at the harbour mouth, and his flag waving in response to hers, she smiled, and lay back upon her pillow. She was tired, she said, and would go to sleep. After tea that night, as usual, the skipper, dressed in his best, came up to the Castle. He was so constant and welcome a visitor, that he came and went as he pleased. Sir Archie saw him coming up the avenue, and went to meet him at the door.

'Come in here, skipper, and I'll go up and see whether

she is awake. She fell asleep content after seeing you in port.'

Sir Archie went up and looked in. Aunt Janet was sitting by the window in the fading light, waiting for the sleeper to stir. She beckoned him in, and they slipped over to the sofa, glad to think that she was enjoying such sound, refreshing slumber. There was a sweet smile on her lips, and an expression of perfect peace on every feature.

Having set her earthly house in order, she had entered upon the heavenly inheritance which the world can neither give nor take away.

These things happened many years ago, but they are not forgotten in Orr's Haven, nor will the sweet young girl, who spent her childhood and girlhood among the fisher folk, and who lived so short a time to enjoy her inheritance, ever be forgotten so long as that good boat, the *Annie Erskine*, continues year after year to perform her noble work. There are no Erskines now in Orr's Haven, the skipper and his wife sleep in the auld kirkyard, not very far from the spot where lies the young lady of St. Veda's. On one of the lightships in dangerous waters off the treacherous Lincolnshire coast, Adam Erskine, the last of his race, lives his solitary life alone with the sea, knowing or caring little for aught except his work. He has neither grown moody nor morose, but his likeness to his father increases day by day, because memory and hope dwell within him, and he knows he will see all those he loves some day.

There is a Sir Archie still in St. Veda's, a solitary man also, without wife or child. Old Sir Archie was right; the lad sought no second love, and there is, for the first time in the annals of his race, a bachelor laird of St. Veda's. Neither is he a miserable nor a useless man. He has remembered the message his first and only love left for him, written by her own hand the day she died.

People speak of him as a wise, good, upright man; one to be trusted absolutely, and as a friend, true as steel. Many bless him; all who know him love him; he is laird, counsellor, and friend in one, to his people. Ethel has found a happy home, and her children are growing up about her, a bright-faced band, who make the sunshine of her own and her husband's life. There is a tall lad, already assuming the airs of manhood, who will one day be 'Sir Archie' to the people of Orr's Haven. He is a great favourite with his uncle, but has not the first place in his heart. The second child, a grave, sweet, womanly young girl, with thought beyond her years, is his best beloved. Her name is Annie, and when the children see him sometimes lay his hand on her sunny curls, and look into her face with a full and earnest eye, they turn softly away, saying among themselves that he is thinking of the dear love who was taken away from him so soon, and who sleeps within sight of the sounding sea.

THE END.